Truth and Knowing After Method: 
A Hermeneutic, Universal, Fiduciary, 
and Provisional Approach to Truth 

by 

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Abstract

This thesis argues that a hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary and provisional approach to truth (HUFPaT) is the unavoidable condition and also the common practice of knowledge claims in areas as diverse as theology, history, the appreciation of art, and the natural sciences; in short, that all knowledge is hermeneutic, for reasons that are both ontological and epistemic. HUFPaT affirms a robust understanding of truth while at the same time recognising the validity of criticisms of overly ambitious epistemologies. Both the natural and the human sciences offer legitimate and similarly founded truth claims which avoid falling into the extremes of either a naive optimism, based on method and the disengaged human subject, or into a relativism that cannot make universal truth claims. I start by considering the historical context and the general issues at stake and then I turn to a serious position against what I will call a robust view of truth and knowing—that of Richard Rorty (chapter 2). I also briefly consider the views of E. D. Hirsch who, at the opposite pole to Rorty, resists the relativism he sees as entailed by the hermeneutic turn and insists on the possibility of access to fixed textual meanings defined entirely in terms of authorial intent. As an alternative to the opposing poles of Hirsch and Rorty, chapter 3 outlines a hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary and provisional approach to truth, rooted in a Heideggerian ontology, as a description of how we do in fact arrive at knowledge claims. For support, in the following chapters I turn to the views of those who accept that criticisms of traditional epistemology are largely correct but that robust truth is nevertheless defensible: I consider Michael Polanyi in the natural sciences (chapter 4) and Hans-Georg Gadamer in the human sciences (chapter 5), expounding aspects of the views of these authors in order to mine them for what they can contribute to HUFPaT and to demonstrate that their positions can be validly described in terms of HUFPaT. The concluding chapter repudiates possible charges against HUFPaT of relativism.
Declaration of Originality

I, Christopher Mulherin, declare that this thesis is my own work and does not contain material which has been previously published or written by any person other than myself except where due and proper reference has been given in the text.

Initial versions of parts of this thesis have appeared in the following article and book chapters of which I am the sole author:


Signed: [Signature]

Date: October 9, 2015
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Finally, this thesis is dedicated to the memory of our oldest son, Ben, who had the temerity to contract cancer at twenty-three when I was only a few months into this work; he died some five months later, quietly confident he was going to a better place. So the journey with Heidegger, Polanyi, Gadamer et al., has also been one shadowed by Ben’s absence; however, his photo overlooks my desk and we have had various conversations over the years.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Interpretation is the basic form of all knowing

Martin Heidegger

The motivation for this thesis arises out of what Charles Taylor calls the “struggle over the corpse of epistemology.” In the light of the moribund Cartesian quest for certitude, is there a future for epistemology or must the patient be allowed to rest in peace as we accustom ourselves to a new cognitive landscape where truth and knowledge amount to nothing more than what one’s peers or internet interlocutors will let one get away with saying? With Taylor, I agree that the struggle is significant: what is at stake “are some of the most important spiritual issues of our time.”

This thesis is about truth and justification after the fall of the Cartesian paradigm in which justification has been assumed to be objective and governed by strictly applied methods that would guarantee truth as an outcome. This is the quest of what I will call ‘traditional epistemology’, which is closely allied with a positivistic ‘received view of science’. In his second meditation Descartes set the stage for the quest: “Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakable.” But the Modern epistemological project—the Cartesian dream of indubitable knowledge, pursued with more vengeance by his followers in their various ways than by Descartes himself—has failed. And with it the aspirations of

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3. Ibid.
ontology, of speculative metaphysics, of Aristotelian-scholastic systematising that
would nail down the essence of hammers and others of J. L. Austin’s “moderate-sized
specimens of dry goods”\(^5\) within bounds which are neatly and indisputably defined by
nature’s carving up of the world rather than by the categorial proclivities of a generation
or school of philosophers; this too has passed.

So what remains after the passing of traditional epistemology? There are two
options: the first is that of pursuing a more nuanced epistemology that recognises the
provisionality of our epistemic pretensions as well as our ontological condition, but
which remains committed to the quest for what I will call robust truth and knowledge,
where robust refers to both the universal ambit of knowledge claims (they are ‘true for
all’) as well as the ability to offer good reasons why they should be accepted. A second
option is that of choosing to resign ourselves to epistemic pessimism, even incoherent
relativisms, believing that whatever the ontological nature of the world, the human
condition entails such limited access to it, or confidence about it, including such
massive disagreement, that claims to truth are not warranted or justified, or perhaps
even not universal. Using terms that need further clarification, I will describe the first
view, that which offers a more nuanced epistemology, as characterised by
provisionality, and the second, pessimistic view, as one form of relativism.

For Christians, theological interpretation is fundamental to dealing with “the
important spiritual issues of our time.” But underlying the question of theological and
biblical hermeneutics is the universal problem of understanding understanding; how do
we arrive at our understandings of texts, of people, of traditions, of history, and how
shall we justify our claim to have understood correctly? What indeed does ‘correctly’
mean? These are questions to be tackled here. I will take up these questions by
following two parallel paths or conversations about understanding and human
knowing—accepting for the moment what I will later challenge: that there is a
distinction between knowing and understanding. One conversation is that which
concerns interpretation in the human sciences—a conversation governed by

‘philosophical hermeneutics’ and by thinkers such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. The other conversation is that about the nature of knowledge in the natural sciences, a vigorous topic in the philosophy of science of the last 60 years and one that I will take up by considering the often-unrecognised but significant contribution of scientist and would-be philosopher, Michael Polanyi. Since the demise of the polymaths of natural philosophy these paths have diverged in the epistemic wood and, to many, it is science\(^6\) that has taken the path marked ‘explanation’, which is assumed to lead to sure knowledge, while other disciplines have followed the path less travelled to ‘understanding’. I contend that while these paths have been understood to be very different, in fact the way to understanding and the way to explanation are similar; both are arrived at through what I will inelegantly call a **hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional approach to truth**—HUFPaT.

I am not aware of others who have made a significant comparison of the work of Polanyi with philosophical hermeneutics, although the similarities have been noted by some,\(^7\) and perhaps most strongly stated by Innis in 1977 who speaks of “the striking resemblance between Polanyi’s model of scientific understanding, based on the critique of scientific objectivism, and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s model of hermeneutical understanding, based on a correlative critique of historical and hermeneutical objectivism.”\(^8\) In the light of deeply entrenched misunderstandings about science, even evident in the work of those such as Gadamer, we will see that part of the solution to the

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6. In order to avoid the cumbersome repetition of ‘the natural sciences’ in this thesis, where there is no danger of ambiguity I will simply use ‘science’ in its colloquial sense to refer to the natural sciences.


universal problem of understanding is to undo misunderstandings about understanding in the natural sciences—the understanding more commonly called knowledge or explanation. So I will challenge the dichotomy between understanding and explanation and in doing so we will see the partial truth of Heidegger’s, “interpretation is the basic form of all knowing.” In other words, all human knowing or understanding is hermeneutic in both an ontological and an epistemological sense, with the corollary that, in the words of Gerhard Ebeling, firstly “hermeneutics now takes the place of the classical epistemological theory,” and, secondly, in the case of theology, hermeneutics is “becoming the place of meeting with philosophy.”

So, the greater part of this thesis might be seen as elaborating on Heidegger’s phrase: in both the natural sciences and the human sciences access to truth follows similar interpretive paths. Despite Cartesian dreamings of certainty, which have propelled the natural sciences to dizzying heights of authority and left other realms of thinking obscured in their shadows, all knowledge claims have similar gestations and are rooted in, and never escape being, provisional interpretive judgments about what is the case. So this thesis appropriates the phenomenological approach of Heidegger and Gadamer and combines it with Polanyi’s views to offer a universal hermeneutic description of human understanding equally applicable to the sciences as it is to other claims to uncover truth. While there are differences between the natural and the human sciences, as there are between any two sub-disciplines of either, the degree of difference is considerably lessened in the light of the mostly unexamined aspects that they share with respect to the path to understanding. The truths revealed in Macbeth and in the Large Hadron Collider arise out of following the same, usually unarticulated and ultimately unarticulable, hermeneutic process, which results in universal, fiduciary, and provisional claims to robust truth.

‘Hermeneutics’ (and its cognates) is often, and was originally, used simply as a synonym for both the first-order practice of interpretation and for the second-order theory of interpretive practice, understood as a search for correct methods of textual

interpretation. However, in addition to these uses, in this thesis ‘hermeneutics’ will also and more commonly be assumed to carry both epistemological and ontological connotations. The ‘hermeneutic turn’, to be elaborated in the chapters on Heidegger and Gadamer, moves hermeneutics from being understood as a method to being a description of the human condition of existence in the world (or as Heidegger puts it, Being-in-the-world) as beings that are finite, historically and culturally conditioned, and whose very mode of being is always inherently interpretive. That is, after the Heideggerian ‘ontological turn’, hermeneutics refers both to interpretation theory and practice but also to the ontological conditions that make interpretation both possible and ubiquitous, and which dictate the nature of human understanding. Another synonym for this ontologically grounded hermeneutics, which arises from the work of Gadamer, is ‘philosophical hermeneutics’.

The aim of taking up Gadamer and Polanyi in this consideration of human knowing in the light of philosophical hermeneutics is not so much to adopt their views uncritically as to use them to redescribe the nature of human understanding in both epistemological and ontological terms. The ontological question is about the conditions under which understanding occurs and which make understanding possible, and, as we will see, ubiquitous. The epistemological question concerns both what we can say about how we go about understanding and also about what sort of justification of understanding can be expected. This last question is conditioned by discussion of the nature of science and what epistemic hopes we invest in that enterprise. So, this thesis examines what all human knowing and understanding has in common before those commonalities are lost in the differences that arise from the differing objects of knowledge claims—differences which have convinced many people that some claims (‘scientific’ claims for example) are sound, or at least superior, and others not so. In the differences we have lost what all understanding holds in common: a search for truth, which, however understood, is about how things are with the one, real, more-than-subjective world and which is based on provisional human interpretive claims made as committed fiduciary judgments upon the best available evidence (understood to extend beyond the empirical). But this commitment to robust truth and knowledge—in
whatever field—is not a commitment to be confused with a generalised impersonal certainty or objectivity based on inconvertible reasons for belief; it is an ‘act of faith’ that finds its expression in provisional human judgments—judgments revealed in any individual scientist’s or interpreter’s committed decision to say, “Yes, I believe that such and such is the case.” This commonality is captured in a particular understanding that would describe all knowing as hermeneutic.

Describing all knowing or understanding as hermeneutic (because knowing is always the outcome of interpretive practices) is only the first and superficial sense that hermeneutics is ubiquitous. The more primordial sense—to speak Heideggerian—arises from the ontological turn in hermeneutics, from hermeneutics as the study and method of interpreting texts, to the realisation that humans are intrinsically hermeneutic beings because interpretation is an essential part of what it is to be human; this is Heidegger’s ‘hermeneutics of facticity’, which reveals humans as finding themselves always and already ‘thrown into a world’ from which they cannot ‘escape’ to observe it in a disengaged manner.\(^\text{11}\) And so, as Caputo points out, Heidegger “gives the ‘hermeneutic circle’—which previously bore only an epistemological or methodological sense—an ontological weight.”\(^\text{12}\)

The claim of hermeneutics to be ubiquitous is, of course, a self-referential one; there is no escaping it. In claiming that all knowing is based on interpretation, which arises out of both ontological and epistemological hermeneutic circles, and leads to truth claims to be affirmed or denied by provisional human judgments, hermeneutics also makes a meta-claim that is itself provisional; it cannot itself be proven and may be disputed. This hermeneutic claim can only be outlined, explained, conversed about, brought into the open, and finally rejected or accepted, by error-prone humans as the truth about the way human understanding works. There is no more to be said to the sceptic—except perhaps, “if you ask for more, you demand what you cannot offer yourself for any other theory of truth or knowledge.” With Richard Rorty, who I will


consider in chapter 2, we have to move forward; we have to reject demands for a more ultimate justification as vacuous. But unlike Rorty we do not need to reject as vacuous those claims about meaning that entail transcendental truths. As we will see, it seems that a Rortian pragmatic approach accepts some things as patently true ("so let’s not argue about them, let’s just move along," it says tacitly) and rejects others as patently untrue (again, “so let’s not argue about them, let’s move on.”)

Given the description that will be outlined here of human knowing and understanding, the conclusion of this thesis is that the natural sciences and the human sciences are alike in the sense that their knowledge claims can validly be characterised as hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional. While these fields are methodical and make use of different and multiple ‘methods’, this thesis, like Gadamer’s magnum opus and like Polanyi’s description of science, is not about method; it is about what comes before and beside methodical approaches. It is about what is common to all human understanding: that which comes before any specific disciplinary practice; that which is the medium in which all methods perform their work; and that which comes before explanation leads understanding into words, equations, or worship.

This thesis has both practical and theoretical aims. While it delves into philosophical hermeneutics and epistemology, the motivation for doing so is apologetic and missiological. It explores some of the theoretical tools and thinking needed in a ‘postmodern’ context to partially defend the Christian claim that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life for all. An issue that is rooted in hermeneutics is that of how Christians might make universal truth claims arising from a text and tradition that is so distant culturally and chronologically, from the world of the interpreter. ‘Teaching the Bible’ is a central practice in conservative Protestant circles but one which is under severe methodological attack and calls for a justification that is sensitive to postmodern criticisms. 13 Hermeneutic theory has also highlighted the fact that the process of textual

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13. Kevin Vanhoozer and Anthony Thiselton are key figures in this discussion in Protestant circles. See for example: Kevin J. Vanhoozer, James K. A. Smith, and Bruce Ellis Benson, eds., *Hermeneutics at the Crossroads* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). Anthony C. Thiselton,
interpretation is only one example of the more general practice of understanding the ‘other’. Meanwhile the scientific fraternity, traditionally the bastion of epistemological certainty or, at least, confidence, is under pressure as dogmatic claims to objective and impersonal truth are increasingly recognised as at least naive and perhaps totally unfounded. Of the authors considered here, it is Polanyi who focuses explicitly on epistemology. His thoughts on personal knowledge will be seen to be relevant beyond his initial concerns with scientific knowledge: his arguments about science lead to a more general one that while the object of science differs to that of history or textual interpretation or theology, the process of knowing is nevertheless a fiduciary one that inevitably involves a personal act of committing oneself to a claim that is made with ‘universal intent’; this is what it is to ‘own’ or take responsibility for one’s convictions.

Hence hermeneutics and epistemology are seen to be closely allied. As the field of hermeneutics has expanded to encompass all human understanding it is clear that it is approaching the question of knowledge from another direction to that of the exact sciences. As Caputo notes, Heidegger has taught us that “we understand as we do because we exist as we do.”14 At a fundamental level all of these questions relate to the issue of perceived (but epistemologically confused) dichotomies characterised by the polarities between knowledge and belief and between knowing subject and object of knowledge. The epistemological questions are hermeneutic ones: they are about interpreting the ‘data’ (the words of a text—for Christians, the Word—and the world of experience) and making universal claims while at the same time recognising human finitude and the engaged nature of our relationship to ‘the world’.

1.1 The epistemological and ontological Hydra

While I will not engage extensively with Charles Taylor, one of the most respected living philosophical thinkers, I will draw on him briefly in this introduction to elaborate some of the issues relevant to my thesis. Taylor uses the apt description of

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traditional epistemology as a “ Hydra whose serpentine heads wreak havoc throughout the intellectual culture of modernity—in science, in criticism, in ethics, in political thinking”\(^\text{15}\)—and, I would add, in theology. Taylor describes the “epistemological construal of knowledge,” post-Descartes, which is under the fateful illusion that we can “get to the bottom of what knowledge is, without drawing on our never-fully-articulable understanding of human life and experience.”\(^\text{16}\) With this view comes a temptation to “a kind of self-possessing clarity, to which our modern culture has been almost endlessly susceptible,”\(^\text{17}\) which means that those who see themselves as critiquing Descartes’ project still give pride of place to epistemology. The basis of this idea is the illusion that if we are to make knowledge claims then we must first “be clear about the nature of knowledge, and about what it is to make a defensible claim.”\(^\text{18}\) So those who see themselves as overcoming the Cartesian standpoint, despite their differing doctrines about knowledge “are still practicing the structural idealism of the epistemological age, defining their ontology, their view of what is, on the basis of a prior doctrine of what we can know.”\(^\text{19}\) For Taylor, Derrida is a prime example of someone who “repeat[s] the epistemological démarche in the negative mode”\(^\text{20}\) as he criticises the Cartesian participation in the error of Western metaphysics, which gives privilege to ‘Presence’ as “a kind of unmediated epistemic contract with reality,” but then reverses things by arguing for the impossibility of Presence and going on to draw confident conclusions about the human condition.

According to Taylor, the real challenge in post-Cartesian epistemology, however, lies in overcoming “the distorted anthropological beliefs”\(^\text{21}\) inherent in the epistemological enterprise. Epistemology is impossible without an adequate anthropology, and a more adequate anthropology would radically change the nature and expectations of epistemology. Taylor makes the point that while such explorations make

16. Ibid., vii-viii.
17. Ibid., viii.
18. Ibid., vii.
19. Ibid., viii.
20. Ibid.
a definitive break with the epistemological tradition, they are also in continuity with it: this task, he says,

would be carrying further the demand for self-clarity about our nature as knowing agents, by adopting a better and more critically defensible notion of what this entails. Instead of searching for an impossible foundational justification of knowledge or hoping to achieve total reflexive clarity about the bases of our beliefs, we would now conceive this self-understanding as awareness about the limits and conditions of our knowing, an awareness that would help us overcome the illusions of disengagement and atomic individuality that are constantly being generated by a civilization founded on mobility and instrumental reason.²²

In the following chapters, this radical re-envisioning of the ontology of human being starts with Heidegger’s ‘Being-in-the-world’ before moving to its outworkings in Gadamer’s and (more tacitly) Polanyi’s understandings of knowing. Following Taylor, a key point at stake in overcoming the epistemological tradition through a more adequate anthropology is the attitude to the primacy of the human will, and responses to this define the two main critiques of modern epistemology. While what Taylor calls the “Heideggerian disclosure stream” rejects the primacy of the will, the Nietzschean self-making path affirms it. Later in this thesis I will attempt to chart a course between these extremes as I emphasise the medial nature of arriving at truth that recognises both human agency as well as the givenness of that which is known. Taylor is right to say that an adequate anthropology is central to epistemological questions, and so he drives us to ontology. My claim is that the work of Heidegger (discussed in chapter 3) and its elaboration by Gadamer (chapter 5) offer the best way forward in rightly understanding these issues. The only viable solution lies in elaboration of a middle way—a way between the Nietzschean primacy of the will and the view that sees in Heideggerian-type disclosure a totally passive human ‘subject’. This is an ontological mediality, described in chapter 3, which I claim is intrinsic to philosophical hermeneutics and which entails one aspect of the provisionality of all knowing.

Another ‘middle’ at play in this thesis is the middle way between extreme objectivism and destructive relativism—between claims for overwhelming confidence and claims that no claim is better than another. When all is said and done that can, up to

²². Ibid.
now and with the ability that I have, be said and done, there remains the responsible choice between alternative truth claims. Whether about the interpretation of a biblical passage or the existence or not of God; whether about accepting or not Einstein’s proposal that energy and mass are interchangeable; whether trusting or not trusting the claims to fidelity of a friend or partner. While in some cases—often the more trivial ones in life—things seem to be clearly weighted on one side of the epistemic equation and doubt would be absurd, we are nevertheless often, and especially in the more profound calls to epistemic commitment, faced with Polanyi’s “I know that I could conceivably be wrong.” That is the human epistemic condition. But it is neither self-satisfied trust in a superior reason that guarantees knowledge nor an abandoning of knowing and agency to a deterministic ontology: it is a middle way that entails the provisional nature of all knowing while nevertheless allowing for robust truth claims to be made.

It is appropriate at this point to note Taylor’s challenge to one aspect of the universality claim I make in this thesis because it acts as a foil to my own claims about similarities between the natural and human sciences. In “Understanding in Human Science” Taylor contests the claim of hermeneutics to break down the distinction between the natural and human sciences. He describes the changed battlelines from a time when a hermeneutic approach in the human sciences was seen as a distinct contrast to knowledge acquisition in the natural sciences. But with the attack on logical empiricism, which attempted to sharply delineate ‘scientific explanation’, the distinction between the human sciences (which clearly do not fit a logical empiricist schema) and the natural sciences breaks down and, according to some, disappears altogether. Taylor says (describing the thesis with which he disagrees): “But, the new thesis goes, this distinction disappears once we realize that the logical empiricists sold us an extraordinary bill of goods about natural science. Once we awaken from our positivist slumbers we realize that none of these features hold of natural science either.


The two turn out to be methodologically at one, not for the positivist reason that there is no rational place for hermeneutics; but for the radically opposed reason that all sciences are equally hermeneutic.” 25 This is a thesis that Taylor challenges; 26 while there is a place for understanding in the natural sciences, “the ‘understanding’ which since Dilthey has been claimed as central to the science of man is different from this.” 27 However, with Rorty, 28 and against Taylor, my thesis makes the case that at a fundamental level the knowing process in natural science is “equally hermeneutic” to that of other realms of knowledge or understanding. Notwithstanding the differences he sees between natural and human sciences, Taylor rightly highlights the deficiency of logical empiricism in not taking into account the pre-understanding that “cannot be exhausted by any list … of formulations” and which is essential to natural science. He says the formulations of science are only intelligible “because we share the background pre-understanding … a background of unstated and not-fully-statable defeasibility conditions.” 29 And so, he says, in Polanyian style, “the understanding we gain through a scientific theory always goes beyond the laws or formulae which exhaust its present formulation”—something that logical empiricism could not recognise because it saw explanatory power as a deduction from the formulation of a theory rather than also involving unstatable pre-understanding. 30 In addition logical empiricism did not “recognize that what made the best explanation the best was never subject to complete articulation, without for all that being a matter of quite arbitrary choice, as Polanyi so well recognized.” 31 However, Taylor maintains, there are nevertheless two different types of understanding at play, which rules out the claim that the human science and the natural sciences are on the same footing.

30. Ibid., 29.
31. Ibid., 29-30.
In the human sciences, the sort of understanding at play is what Taylor calls “human understanding, understanding what makes someone tick, or how he feels or acts as a human being.”32 This concerns understanding of what Elizabeth Anscombe called ‘desirability-characterizations’—“the way in which the relevant courses of action can be desirable or undesirable” for someone. Such understanding is about being able to see things from the perspective of the other person—irrespective of whether one agrees with their stance, and the ability to apply terms (‘desirability-characterizations’) of a certain kind. But, says Taylor, such terms “belong to a range of descriptions which lie outside what has been considered the limits of natural science” because they violate Bernard Williams’ ‘requirement of absoluteness’, traditionally seen as central to science, which rejects subject-related properties that only arise as long as things are objects of the experience of human subjects. Such understanding is of such things as another person’s emotions or aspirations, what they love and what they loathe, what they find admirable and what they don’t; it is, in the language of phenomenology, to understand another’s world and the significance of things for them.33 So, says Taylor, “the claim that what I have called human understanding is essential to the sciences of man amounts to a claim that the two kinds of science are distinguished from each other at least in this, that the requirement of absoluteness can be made (and indeed, we all agree that it must be made) of natural science, but is inapplicable to human science.”34

However, as will become clear in this thesis, the idea of any science making claims to absoluteness (as opposed to universal but provisional claims tempered by a Heideggerian ontology) is incoherent. Putnam perhaps puts this overly strongly in his rejection of such ‘realist’ views when he says: “elements of what we call ‘language’ or ‘mind’ penetrate so deeply into what we call ‘reality’ that the very project of representing ourselves as being ‘mappers’ of something ‘language-independent’ is

32. Ibid., 30.
33. Ibid., 32.
34. Ibid.
fatally compromised from the very start. Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere.”  

The instability of the sandy foundations of certainty in the natural sciences is not a revelation that arrived with philosophical hermeneutics; it has been logically evident since David Hume, and more obviously and practically in the last century as scientists such as Ludwik Fleck, Max Planck, and Michael Polanyi have highlighted the nature of science in practice. It was Planck, the Nobel-prize-winning physicist who, in the late 1940s, provocatively noted that “a new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.” Others too have probed the foundations of science to highlight numerous problems with the received positivist view of science as the purely objective, disengaged search for truth in which, ideally, no personal or subjective factors should be allowed to play a part. The physicist turned historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, who in the words of one commentator, “pounded sociological nails into the coffin of positivist theories of science,” is perhaps the most famous of those who emphasised the human and social dimensions of science—although as we will see, it was not Kuhn but others, such as Polanyi, who forged the nails. These themes are taken up with a vengeance by non- or anti-realists of one ilk or another who, as Taylor notes, all seem to accept an epistemological paradigm (to use the word that Kuhn famously popularised) that results in them throwing out the baby of

37. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge.
39. Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). Kuhn exegeted the earlier work of Polanyi in many ways, but presented a model that was less obscure than Polanyi’s meandering descriptions and which was also made more accessible by the use of a number of terms such as ‘revolution’, ‘paradigm’, ‘normal science’, and ‘anomaly’. For one of various analyses of the relationship between the work of Kuhn and Polanyi see, for example, Struan Jacobs, “Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn: Priority and Credit,” Tradition and Discovery: The Polanyi Society Periodical 33, 2 (2007).
robust truth with the bathwater of an impossible epistemology.\textsuperscript{41} This thesis argues that robust truth can survive redrawing the epistemological bathwaters.

### 1.2 Truth, knowledge, and understanding

At the outset it is worth clarifying that there are some truths which I see no point in defending— assumptions upon which all conversation and defence depends, notwithstanding the philosophical scepticism of mostly undergraduates. Whatever we make of disputed arguments such as Putnam’s, which claim to refute the possibility that we are brains in vats,\textsuperscript{42} I will not enter such debates. I take it that the external world exists, that readers of this thesis exist independently of me, that we can meaningfully use the word ‘truth’ to refer in some sense to a relationship between my claims or beliefs and the world (although such use is not necessarily to adopt ‘the correspondence theory of truth’), that communication does occur (so, these words are being understood, even if imperfectly and leaving more to be said by way of clarification), and, slightly more controversially, that most of what we do believe is true even if such ‘belief’ is not propositional, explicit, or precise.

The relevant question for this thesis is not whether such presuppositions can be proven to be incontrovertibly true, but whether and how we validly arrive at the tacit claim, which daily living entails, that we do in fact know something of the nature of the world and of other minds and also of either the reality or the non-existence of God. My contention is that these implicit knowledge claims are, in one sense, all of a kind—not because the objects of those claims are of a kind, but because we arrive at such convictions by following a similar hermeneutic path, which involves a personal fiduciary commitment made with universal intent about how the world really is, independent of our thinking that it is so and all the while aware that our convictions


could conceivably be false. This I am calling a *hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional approach to truth*.

A word about truth is in order. Some reactions to the problem of epistemological insecurity are to turn to an idea of epistemic truth—truth as warranted belief or justifiable belief, for example—in a move that easily confuses truth with ‘what we take to be true’ or that conflates truth with criteria of truth, and which eliminates the traditional connection between truth and a (human-) mind-transcendent world. This won’t do; no sense can be made of the idea of truth if it is not part of what might be called a critical or post-critical realist understanding of the world (but avoiding the naive version that Putnam rejects), which holds that, in large measure, there is an objectively given world, even if it is not given objectively to human beings. So, with respect to truth, and in the style of Burgess and Burgess, I will “set aside the postmodernist answer, ‘All truths are enforced by the hegemonic structures of society,’” and variations thereof. Their reasons for doing so are also mine: such a description of truth “confuses something’s passing for true in a given society with its actually *being* true, overlooking the question, ‘What is something that passes for true in a given society passing for?’”43 This thesis will separate truth from what passes for truth in contrast to those such as Richard Rorty who effectively elide them. People want to make claims they believe are true—statements about how it is with an extra-mental ‘world’—but such statements do not need to be ‘known without doubt to be true’ and, notwithstanding Rorty’s view, ‘true’ nevertheless makes sense in the first part of this sentence. For Rorty, as we will see in chapter 2, ‘true’ only makes sense if interchangeable with a phrase such as ‘what people agree upon’, which results in banality; of course we can know (almost) without doubt what people agree upon, but if that is to be a description of truth then Rorty retains certainty about some things at the expense of the distinction between ‘true’ and ‘believed true’; his redefinition saves the certainty of truth at the expense of losing its relationship to a reality that in some sense is the ultimate arbiter of the truth of beliefs. In the interests of epistemic humility I will

do away with certainty altogether but retain the concept of robust truth, which, I contend, can be substantiated or justified under a hermeneutic conception of human understanding and being, but cannot be incorrigibly proven.

‘Knowledge’ too is another fraught term and the history of the question of the nature of knowledge is long but inconclusive; it is still not clear what we mean when we say that we know. One aspect of this thesis is a cumulative case to the effect that the word ‘knowledge’ is no longer, if it ever was, a useful one. What work does it now do in the English language? ‘Knowing’ covers over a multitude of doubts and qualifications, sweeping them under the carpet in a bid for an impossible epistemic high ground and forcing a spurious divide between the ‘known’ and the ‘believed’, between facts and other things we believe but that we supposedly do not or cannot ‘know’, such as values or moral claims or religious claims.

It seems that much effort has been expended on the basis that we intuitively understand what ‘knowledge’ means—how to play the ‘knowledge’ language game—and then go about working out how to define precisely what it is that we intuit as if (a) there were a coherent concept involved, and (b) the knowledge game had fixed rules. So we ask whether justified true belief (JTB) is an adequate description of what we intuit about the nature of knowledge. Then, after a remarkably brief 1963 paper, in the light of Gettier-type problems we suggest that JTB plus some addendum—a fourth condition for knowledge—is the formula for the elusive definition of the elusive concept. This is an extraordinary state of affairs and for more than one reason. Firstly, there is a circularity involved in the exercise of making a knowledge claim about what knowledge itself consists in, on which we cannot agree but about which we intuitively ‘know’ the answer; perhaps our intuitions are afflicted by the Cartesian demon and are misguided. Secondly, as we take up ‘true’ as the central definitional element of JTB ‘knowledge’ we beg the question by invoking the problem of knowing what is true; without already knowing what is true, we cannot make a knowledge claim. It seems that ‘knowledge’ falls into paradox or an unrealisably explicit ideal.

In common parlance, distant from philosophical wrangling, to say that I know something is to make a particular sort of claim about an assertion; it involves a claim about the degree of confidence with which I hold an assertion to be true. It might be shorthand for saying that I believe something to be true and that I believe it with a high degree of confidence. But it might also be shorthand for those things that I ‘know for sure’. This is another way of saying that we don’t and couldn’t question them—that I exist, have arms and legs, have a family, live in Melbourne etc. These are not knowledge claims; they are the indisputable truths of life. But when we speak of knowledge we mean, surely, those more formal claims that could conceivably be false, that could be questioned, and that lend themselves without absurdity to rational justification. I offer no justification to defend my claim that I live in Melbourne or have a family. I would enter the realms of absurdity to seriously embark on justifying such things; they are, from my point of view (which, as we will see, is all that I have), indisputable, and of them, I am more convinced than I could possibly be by any conceivable evidence to the contrary. With Heidegger, I suggest that it is absurd that proofs of, for example, whether there is an ‘external world’, are demanded. And, with Heidegger and Gadamer, I suggest that, after their rethinking of human being, the epistemological project takes on a dramatically new light. In Heidegger’s words, responding to Kant’s challenge,

the ‘scandal of philosophy’ is not that this proof has yet to be given, but that such proofs are expected and attempted again and again. Such expectations, aims, and demands arise from an ontologically inadequate way of starting with something of such a character that independently of it and ‘outside’ of it a ‘world’ is to be proved as present-at-hand. It is not that the proofs are inadequate, but that the kind of Being of the entity which does the proving and makes requests for proofs has not been made definite enough.45

As will become increasingly apparent in this thesis, one previously mentioned implication of questioning traditional understandings of knowledge is a blurring of the divide between knowing and understanding; while I use both words this should not be taken as affirmation that they are categorically distinct. The implication of this thesis is that it is more accurate to talk of scientific understanding than knowledge and, given

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45. Heidegger, Being and Time, 249.
the alliance of ‘knowledge’ with Cartesian hopes of proof and indubitability, I suggest that the use of ‘knowledge’ confuses the discussion by importing an inference that it is possible to delineate an area of human endeavour free of subjectivity and which offers incontrovertible conclusions. ‘Understanding’ on the other hand speaks of the subject and of dialogue, but is also characterised by being open to judgments that it is correct or incorrect: it is not ‘merely subjective’ or relativist in a way that eliminates the possibility of robust truth claims. Nor is it monotonal because every area of endeavour has its own ways to understanding, just as ‘the scientific method’ is a misnomer if it is understood as identical in every field of enquiry.

A brief excursus at this point is relevant in order to point out that one aspect of my view in this thesis has terminological implications. Notwithstanding the argument above for ridding us of the ‘knowledge’, I will continue to use the term although in the more nuanced sense that is the outcome of the argument of this thesis. However, for reasons that will become clear, I will deliberately err on the side of speaking about ‘knowing’ rather than ‘knowledge’, emphasising both the event-like aspect of knowing and also the agency involved: the dynamic, continuous verbal form (‘knowing’) captures both aspects in a way that the static, timeless noun ‘knowledge’ does not. This dynamism of the encounter with truth is central to the authors I draw on significantly: Heidegger, for the ontological grounding of HUFPaT, and Gadamer and Polanyi for the way they describe human knowing in their respective fields.

1.3 Why Gadamer and Polanyi?

In response to Michael Dummett’s attempt to resolve the “the scandal caused by philosophy’s lack of a systematic methodology,” Richard Bernstein says the following: “Hovering in the background of this pursuit [of turning philosophy into a rigorous science] is what might be called ‘the Cartesian Anxiety’—the fear or apprehension that if there are no such basic constraints, no foundations, no determinate ‘rules of the game’, then we are confronted with intellectual and moral chaos where anything
Polanyi and Gadamer are two key figures who have overcome this Cartesian anxiety but at the same time emphatically do not believe that anything goes: neither is content with the slide from epistemic provisionality into relativist nihilism, which assumes that if there are “no determinate rules of the game,” there can be no game at all. Both Polanyi and Gadamer try to chart a course that arrives at what I have called robust truth while at the same time rejecting the objectivist and relativist poles, both of which depend on foundationalist aspirations to justifying knowledge. Both Polanyi’s ‘personal knowledge’ and Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics are characterised by what Polanyi calls *universal intent*. However, the work of both authors is also universal in another way: Gadamer’s hermeneutics was a universal analysis of the problem of human understanding, and while Polanyi focussed initially on scientific knowing he soon found himself working towards a universal epistemology, or in his own words, “an alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally.” The question to be considered is whether they are successful in holding on to a robust notion of truth without either falling backwards into Cartesian neurosis or tripping over their own feet into the relativist abyss.

It is an interesting accident of history that in the space of a couple of years in the mid-twentieth century, two of the most significant critiques of the Enlightenment dream of certain knowledge and detached epistemological objectivism were published. Polanyi’s *Personal Knowledge* was published in 1958 and Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* in 1960. Yet apparently neither author was significantly influenced by the other. For Polanyi, once a world-leading physical chemist, the initial and predominant focus of his attention is the knowledge that comes from the natural sciences, the object of which is the material world, while for Gadamer the project is about human understanding, the object of which ranges from history and texts to art and music.

In hermeneutic circles the choice to take up Gadamer in this thesis can pass without justification: he is recognised as the towering father-figure of twentieth-century

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philosophical hermeneutics. Building on the work of Heidegger he produced a
manifesto on understanding in the human sciences that remains the ground of
hermeneutic theory today. Meanwhile in the philosophy of science, Polanyi does not
command the same overriding respect although perhaps he should do so for recognising
long ago what Stephen Shapin calls, “a massive mismatch between dominant
characterizations of the sources of our factual knowledge and the ways in which we
actually secure that knowledge.”47 Kuhn, for example, read Polanyi and in the words of
Martin Moleski, Polanyi’s biographer, “all that is good in Kuhn’s position is found in
Polanyi.”48 Hubert Dreyfus notes that along with Kuhn, Polanyi shares Heidegger’s
opposition to the epistemological tradition and that they have much in common: “All
three thinkers claim that the theoretical, disinterested knowledge that is correctly
described in subject/object terms and has been held up as the best example of
knowledge for the last 2500 years presupposes a practical and involved ‘know-how’
that cannot be accounted for in terms of theoretical knowledge. According to these
thinkers, theoretical knowledge depends on practical skills.”49 This thesis is, in large
part, an exploration of such parallels between Polanyi’s personal knowledge and a
hermeneutics based on Heidegger and Gadamer.

It is appropriate to comment on the obvious difference between these authors
before remarking briefly in the closing part of this chapter on similarities in their
approaches to their respective objects of investigation. Simply put, while Polanyi’s
main focus begins with a theory of knowledge of the natural world, Gadamer’s interest
is on understanding in the human sciences. In particular Polanyi is interested in the
process of scientific discovery while Gadamer hardly considered how his work touched
on the natural sciences, partly because he accepted an overly positivistic view of them.
It is Polanyi’s understanding of the natural sciences that not only makes links with

47. S. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*
human knowing in general but also opens the way for a Gadamerian hermeneutics to contribute significantly to the philosophy of science.

My own interest and choice of these authors is due the fact that while the objects of their work are distinct, I believe that their epistemological approaches are similar as both describe remarkably comparable processes that lead to knowledge claims in their different realms. To put that another way, this thesis concerns the grounds or justification for their knowledge claims and not the fruit of those claims; I’m concerned with the means of coming to know, but not so much the objects known. Although he doesn’t deal with science at length, Gadamer hints at this similarity in the foreword to the second edition of Truth and Method: “The difference [between the natural and the human sciences] that confronts us is not in the method but in the objectives of knowledge,” and he understands his philosophical hermeneutics as concerning something that “does not so much confine or limit modern science as precede it and make it possible.” For Gadamer this is because his hermeneutics is rooted in the Heideggerian Dasein and “hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world,” including that of the natural scientist. However, such statements have to be tempered as we will see, with Gadamer’s misunderstanding of the natural sciences as rigidly dominated by method. For his part, while Polanyi focused initially on knowledge in the natural sciences he soon found himself working towards a universal epistemology, or in his own words, “an alternative ideal of knowledge, quite generally,” although, despite his aspirations and even his very brief references to his own Heideggerian ontology, he did not arrive at a view of knowledge that explicitly includes the insights of philosophical hermeneutics.

52. Ibid., xxvii.
Although both these authors protested against objectivism and the notion that knowledge or understanding is the outcome of disengaged, objective, formalised method, they also rejected subjectivist, sceptical, and relativist implications of their work, all of which accept a Cartesian, foundational model of knowledge but with differing degrees of optimism or pessimism about its possible success. What makes Polanyi and Gadamer alike and radical, is not that they simply reject the extremes of this spectrum, but rather, they reject the entire paradigm of knowledge implied in such descriptions of an objective-subjective spectrum. For the purposes of this thesis I am taking objectivism to describe the view which holds that epistemic outcomes are, at least ideally, independent of the knower. They are simply uncovered without any element of being constituted by the, ideally, disengaged and neutral knower. And in so far as these outcomes are tainted by human agency, objectivism holds this to be an unfortunate muddying of the waters to be reduced to a minimum. Subjectivism on the other hand, I take as that view that sees this human clutter as inevitable and overwhelming, to the point that while the truth may be ‘out there’ it is unknowable across the gap between knowing subject and the external object of knowledge. Both Polanyi and Gadamer offer another paradigm that sees subjectivity and objectivity, not as competing poles but as mutually reinforcing and essential aspects of knowing, and, they hold, without such a view there can be no knowledge. So, while both recognise the two poles of interpreter and meaning, they reject the inadequate descriptions implied by either subjectivism or objectivism. Gadamer’s hermeneutics aims at true understanding and, in Polanyian terms, natural science and hermeneutics both result in personal knowledge the outcome of which is often explicit truth claims made with universal intent. That is, both authors affirm the possibility of claims that are inescapably humanly constituted but also held with a conviction that maintains they are not just ‘true for me’ but, in some sense, universally true; they are true for all people.

So, the first thing that unites these thinkers is the nature of their pursuit; both Gadamer and Polanyi might be described as post-Cartesian proponents of robust truth. The point at issue is whether they succeed in justifying their truth claims in a way that does not succumb to a damaging form of relativism—a question to which I will return
in the last chapter. In their respective fields both thinkers are driven to justify their conviction that it is possible to speak of truth without falling into the Enlightenment trap that binds truth to certainty and detached epistemological objectivity. They want to hold on to the baby of truth while throwing out the bathwater of Cartesian rationalism. In the sense that both reject the possibility of an Archimedean point, unmediated by tradition and unaffected by personal beliefs, they are anti-objectivist. But both stand against relativism and extreme subjectivism by holding that, while certainty is a chimera, we can nevertheless speak of truth and make universal truth claims. While they use different language, there is a marked correspondence in the way Gadamer and Polanyi describe what we might cautiously call the products of hermeneutics and of the natural sciences respectively.

Both authors dedicate themselves to the task of articulating a description of the actual practice of human understanding or knowledge production. They do so by focussing on an explication of knowledge that can be characterised as provisional in that it is neither certain nor is it final: it may be wrong and even if true, there is yet more truth to be known. And both understand themselves to be attempting an escape from what Gadamer calls the “entanglement in traditional epistemology.” In line with the hermeneutic tradition, while Gadamer’s project is a search for understanding, the title of his magnum opus makes it clear that it is truth or true understanding that he seeks. While he is against objectivist interpretations neither would he be satisfied with a merely subjectivist interpreter-response approach to art or texts or history. He believes that texts can validly “claim to be saying something true,” and of philosophical hermeneutics he says that it points the way to “recognizing an entirely different notion of knowledge and truth.” But Gadamer’s hermeneutics holds on to a robust conception of truth as we will see, and it is a distortion to exploit his hermeneutics as some have done in the name of a sceptical pragmatism. Rorty is perhaps the most celebrated

55. Gadamer, Truth and Method, 278.
example, of whom Bernstein rightly says, “from Gadamer’s perspective, Rorty’s hermeneutics is mutilated or castrated, for it is a hermeneutics without the claim to knowledge and truth.”

For Gadamer true understanding is neither subjective nor objective and nor can it ever be final. It is not merely subjective because it is in some sense true and “meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way.” He also talks of the danger of failing “to hear what the other person is really saying” or of “ignoring as consistently and stubbornly as possible the actual meaning of the text. … The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s own fore-meanings.” Meanwhile, from the other direction come charges of relativism summed up in Hirsch’s critical review of *Truth and Method*: “If we cannot enunciate a principle for distinguishing between an interpretation that is valid and one that is not, there is little point in writing books about texts or about hermeneutic theory.” However, as will be clear by the end of this thesis, Hirsch’s critique misses the mark because it expects Gadamer to remain within Hirsch’s objectivist framework—a demand that Gadamer’s Heideggerian ontology rules out of order.

Polanyi, for his part, is willing to speak of objective knowledge but only in a carefully delimited sense, which leads to his novel term ‘personal knowledge’. He says, “comprehension is neither an arbitrary act nor a passive experience, but a responsible act claiming universal validity. Such knowing is indeed *objective* in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality … It seems reasonable to describe this fusion of the personal and the objective as Personal Knowledge.” And, Polanyi says, pointing to the universality of such truth claims, “by trying to say something that is true about a reality believed to be existing independently of our knowing it, all assertions of fact

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necessarily carry universal intent. Our claim to speak of reality serves thus as the external anchoring of our commitment in making a factual statement.”61 So, while Polanyi is happy to talk of ‘knowledge’, he does so in this radically qualified sense of personal knowledge, defined most expansively in his magnum opus of that title. However, his ‘personal’ should never be understood as a subjectivism that does away with robust contact with reality: personal knowledge “claims to have made contact with reality: a reality which, being real, may yet reveal itself to future eyes in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations.”62

We have seen that scientific discovery for Polanyi or arriving at understanding in Gadamer’s terms, is to arrive at knowledge of universal truth, but that this knowledge cannot adequately be theorised using the model that separates a knowing and impersonal subject from the object of knowledge, and that imagines there are methodological guarantees of success. For both authors, truth is to be had but not by accepting the Enlightenment paradigm. And for both, knowledge is a provisional interpretation, always in the making; it might turn out to be wrong. Whether we talk of Newton and Einstein or Romeo and Juliet some interpretations are simply better than others. But conviction, not certainty or inconvertibility, is the appropriate description of beliefs that no longer lie on a spectrum between certainty and radical scepticism or relativism.

1.4 Conclusion

This thesis argues that a hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional approach to truth (HUFPaT) is the unavoidable condition and also the common practice of knowledge claims ranging across all areas of practical and intellectual endeavour; in short, that all knowing is hermeneutic, for reasons that are both ontological and epistemic. HUFPaT incorporates a robust understanding of truth while at the same time recognising the validity of criticisms of overly ambitious epistemologies. Both the natural and the human sciences can offer legitimate and similarly founded truth claims

61. Ibid., 311.
which avoid falling into the extremes of either a naive optimism, based on method and the disengaged human subject, or into a relativism that cannot make universal truth claims.

I turn in the next chapter to a serious position against what I am calling a robust view of truth and knowledge— that of Richard Rorty. In that chapter I will also briefly consider the views of E. D. Hirsch who, at the opposite pole to Rorty, resists the relativism he sees as entailed by the hermeneutic turn and insists on the possibility of access to fixed textual meanings defined entirely in terms of authorial intent.

As an alternative to the opposing poles of Hirsch and Rorty, chapter 3 outlines aspects of a hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional approach to truth, rooted in a Heideggerian ontology, as a description of how we do in fact arrive at knowledge claims. For support, chapters 4 and 5 turn to the views of Polanyi and Gadamer respectively who, as we have seen briefly above, accept that criticisms of traditional epistemology are largely correct but that robust truth is nevertheless defensible. In those chapters I expound aspects of the views of Gadamer and Polanyi in order to mine them for what they can contribute to HUFPaT. The concluding chapter repudiates possible charges of relativism against HUFPaT.
Chapter 2

All or Nothing: Hirsch or Rorty?

In this chapter I consider two well-known and oft-cited thinkers who respond to the ‘ontological turn’ in hermeneutics in very different ways. Richard Rorty and E. D. Hirsch serve, respectively, as radical and conservative bookends to the issues at hand. Almost polar opposites, the first would do away with robust truth, deflating ‘truth’ to the shared agreement that is the outcome of community discussion, while the second responds by resisting the hegemony of ontological hermeneutics and, in the field of textual interpretation, by arguing for the possibility of fixed objective meanings dictated by authorial intent. Rorty’s ‘epistemological behaviourism’ denies validity to any notion of truth other than one that is, in the last analysis, dependent on cultural and social factors. Meanwhile Hirsch attacks the relativism he believes is inherent in hermeneutics after the ontological turn and argues for the univocity of truth in textual interpretation; for him, the true and only meaning of a text is the meaning implanted in it by the original author. I will consider Rorty’s views in more depth than those of Hirsch, primarily because Rorty offers a serious case for accepting the discomfiting (to some) relativist implications of the critique of Cartesian and Enlightenment hopes of sure and objective knowledge.

This consideration of Rorty and Hirsch serves as a foil for HUFPaT because both, in their different ways, provide a motivation for a more nuanced view such as mine. In brief, both authors provide critiques that set the agenda for my project of seeking a view of provisional but robust truth that does not succumb to criticisms of being naive itself. Positively, they articulate the shortcomings of, in Hirsch’s case, a naive provisionality that falls into interpretive nihilism, and in the case of Rorty, of a naive view of truth. With respect to the latter, I agree, with qualifications, that “we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion”¹ and that we have no option but to “rely on inarticulate know-how, to substitute phronesis for

codification.” However, despite their elucidations of naive approaches, both authors have less-than-nuanced reactions to such shortcomings, as we will see below, and the implicit question raised is whether HUFPaT can avoid the conclusions of either Rorty or Hirsch.

In this chapter, although I will offer brief criticisms particularly of Rorty, the primary aim is to paint a picture of their respective positions. In later chapters I will offer a position that navigates the via media between the polar contrasts represented by Rorty and Hirsch by recognising the validity of philosophical hermeneutics but also holding on to the possibility of robust truth. The question that this current chapter raises, which it is the task of the remainder of this thesis to respond to, is whether an adequate response can be made that defends the possibility of robust truth in the face of arguments such as those of Rorty, but without following Hirsch in rejecting the ontological and epistemic implications inherent in philosophical hermeneutics. In short, given radical human finitude and co-constitution with the world to which our truth claims point, in what sense can we claim to know or grasp truth? Or, with Rorty, is that a confused manner of speaking?

2.1 Rorty’s epistemological behaviourism

Richard Rorty (1931-2007), who is perhaps the most respected proponent of pragmatist philosophy since Dewey, deals with the intractable and traditional philosophical problems associated with defining and grasping truth and reality by turning away from that project to adopt a “community-based understanding of truth” and proposing a role for philosophy characterised by imaginative rhetoric rather than rigour. According to Rorty, the philosophy of the last two millennia has lost its way in a fruitless discussion that does little to promote the ‘conversation of mankind’. In his inimitable style, he challenges philosophy’s quest for epistemic security, “driven by the

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need to find something to be apodictic about.” With respect to epistemology, he falls into what Linda Zagzebski calls the “death-of-epistemology” camp.\(^4\)

Rorty paints a picture of late nineteenth-century philosophical turmoil brought about by “the ‘naturalization’ of epistemology by psychology” and the decline of German idealism. Out of the turmoil arose aesthetic ironists like James and Bradley, and the social reformer Dewey—thinkers who proclaimed the unreality of traditional epistemological problems and solutions; “they were provoked to radical criticisms of ‘truth as correspondence’ and ‘knowledge as accuracy of representations,’ thus threatening the entire Kantian notion of philosophy as metacriticism of the special disciplines.”\(^5\) Rorty adopts and adapts the pragmatism of James and Dewey in his agenda for a “liberal utopia” to reform both philosophy and society, and to protect the best of Western liberalism.\(^6\) For Rorty, traditional philosophy is unnecessary baggage on this journey, based as it is on incoherent notions about the nature of reality ‘in itself’ and the futile pursuit of apodictic truth based on a representationalist epistemology. According to Rorty, the future is constructed through rhetorical debate in the public sphere as a utopian vision takes shape of the sort of society we want. Rorty’s project is explicitly ethnocentric, as he recognises, but, in the absence of universal adjudicating standards beyond human consensus, the choice for the philosopher and thinker is either to contribute constructively to the debate or to bunker down in fruitless philosophical disputes. So Rorty is a self-described liberal ironist: liberal because “liberals are people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do”\(^8\) and ironist because ironists know that their ‘final vocabulary’ is contingent and not dictated by the nature of the world or a

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8. Ibid.
human essence. Ironists also recognise their precarious social position: “The opposite of irony is common sense,” says Rorty.

According to Rorty, philosophy has proven not that it is inadequate to the task, but that the task itself, of securing the foundations of knowledge and truth, is misconceived and therefore futile. Rorty’s conclusion is that truth lies in consensus, not in correspondence with reality: “If we have a Deweyan conception of knowledge, as what we are justified in believing, then we will not imagine that there are enduring constraints on what can count as knowledge, since we will see ‘justification’ as a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between ‘the knowing subject’ and ‘reality.’”¹⁰ For Rorty, the implication of this view is that rhetorical persuasion not rational argument is the key to his goal of forging a liberal utopia.

In his 1998 Achieving our Country, in the context of a discussion about morality, Rorty scorns “the idea of a fixed standard by which deviance from the truth could be measured and denounced”¹¹ and he affirms the intellectual courage of Dewey in abandoning the idea, in either science or morality, of what Putnam called a “God’s-Eye View”:¹²

Dewey abandoned the idea that one can say how things really are, as opposed to how they might best be described in order to meet some particular human need. In this respect he is in agreement with Nietzsche, and with such critics of ‘the metaphysics of presence’ as Derrida and Heidegger. For all these philosophers, objectivity is a matter of intersubjective consensus among human beings, not of accurate representation of something nonhuman. Insofar as human beings do not share the same needs, they may disagree about what is objectively the case. But the resolution of such disagreement cannot be an appeal to the way reality, apart from any human need, really is. The resolution can only be political: one must use democratic institutions and procedures to conciliate the various needs, and thereby widen the range of consensus about how things are.

Those who find this line of philosophical thought horrifying do not agree with Dewey and Foucault that the subject is a social construction, and that discursive practices go all the way down. They think that moral idealism depends on moral universalism—on an

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9. Ibid., 74.
appeal to universally shared demands, built into human nature, or to the nature of social
practice.  

2.2 Rorty’s argument

With respect to Rorty’s position, it seems that despite his sometimes-overstated
rhetoric, he is an epistemic rather than an ontological relativist. We cannot know what is
true, he would say, so there is no point in talking about truth in that sense as if we can
have access to truth in an unmediated way. The only epistemic alternative open to us is
to take as true that on which we agree. So, on the one hand, Rorty would convince us
that truth is simply the outcome of our epistemic practices—what one’s peers will let
one get away with saying.  

Such is Rorty’s philosophical project. But, on the other
hand, Rorty is also committed to another project, a political one, and one that involves
persuading others of a certain position about which he too is apparently convinced of its
truth or validity or, more vaguely, its betterness in a universal sense. While Rorty
advocates a total (epistemic) relativism he also argues that some political or moral
views are better than others. However, given his relativism, his ‘argument’ must turn to
rhetorical persuasion rather than an appeal to rational grounds.

Before turning to Rorty’s substantial argument in Philosophy and the Mirror of
Nature, I will first outline more of his mature conclusions (including his use of the
terms in question) concerning relativism and truth as exhibited in one of his last public
presentations, a 2005 lecture in Italy called “An Ethics for Today: Finding Common
Ground for Philosophy and Religion.” In the lecture Rorty contrasts his own view
with that of the Catholic Church and clarifies his understanding of relativism. He
describes the Church as affirming the reality of a “structure of human existence, which
can serve as a moral reference point,” while for his part, Rorty sides with John Stuart
Mill in holding that the only moral obligation humans have is that of “helping one
another satisfy our desires, thus achieving the greatest possible amount of happiness.”

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16. Ibid., 8.
This clearly utilitarian ethic is one for which Rorty makes no apology; in the face of the Church’s view that utilitarianism makes animals of human beings, Rorty claims, in revealing phraseology, that on the contrary, “utilitarianism exalts us by offering us a challenging moral ideal. Utilitarianism leads to heroic and self-sacrificing efforts on behalf of social justice.”

One must assume that the irony of this positive moral appraisal of heroism, self-sacrifice and social justice is not lost on Rorty the liberal ironist. But irrespective of whether he acknowledges the strange juxtaposition of utilitarianism and moral virtues such as heroism, there seems to be a clear appeal to moral values above and beyond, or at least additional to, that of increasing the net amount of happiness on the planet. While social justice might conceivably be defined in utilitarian terms as maximising human happiness or desire satisfaction, that is not the case with heroism and self-sacrifice. As normally understood, and when not remoulded to fit a utilitarian scheme, one can imagine exemplary situations of heroism or self-sacrifice that neither increase net happiness nor were even intended to do so.

Although such appeals to the exaltation, heroism and self-sacrifice of human beings invoke non-utilitarian, morally loaded terms, Rorty is convinced that “such [heroic and self-sacrificing] efforts are entirely compatible with the claim that there is no such thing as the structure of human existence.” Rorty says that, with George Santayana, he believes that the only source of moral ideals is the human imagination and he rejects the superstitious view, which he links with Heidegger’s criticism of ontotheology, that moral ideals are grounded in any structure of human existence. He says:

To give oneself over to a moral ideal is like giving oneself over to another human being. When we fall in love with another person, we do not ask about the source or the nature of our obligation to cherish that person’s welfare. It is equally pointless to do so when we have fallen in love with an ideal. Most of Western philosophy is, like Christian theology, an attempt to get in touch with something larger than ourselves. So to accept Santayana’s view, as I do, is to repudiate the tradition that Heidegger called ontotheology. That repudiation means ceasing to ask both metaphysical questions about the

17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
ground or the source of our ideals and epistemological questions about how one can be certain that one has chosen the correct ideal.  

This passage, which unnecessarily forces a wedge between the repudiation of ontotheology and the possibility of any sort of metaphysical questioning, is one to which I will return after finishing this exposition of Rorty’s paper. Suffice to say that, with respect to epistemology, while one cannot “be certain that one has chosen the correct ideal,” the question is whether Rorty’s repudiation of such questions is because of that epistemic uncertainty or because he wants to make an ontological claim about the non-existence of such ideals as part of the structure of human existence. If it is the second, as seems clear in his paper, then it also involves an implicit epistemic claim to know that there is no source of such ideals beyond the human imagination. One need not abandon the quest for truth because one recognises that certainty is a chimera, let alone, as Rorty does, make a truth claim about such ideals not existing while at the same time repudiating the asking of such questions. The situation sounds suspiciously like the sort of family argument stopper that goes, “I’m just going to say this and then I’m leaving the room and not going to argue any more,” which leaves the interlocutor frustrated at having been presented with a poor argument without recourse to further discussion.

Rorty elaborates on his metaphor of falling in love by saying that there is no possibility of an appeal to neutral criteria to choose between two people or between two ideals such as atheistic and religious forms of spirituality. So in the face of the demands of the ontotheological tradition, which insists on raising metaphysical and epistemological questions, Rorty says that conversion cannot be rationally justified: “It is futile to look for a demonstration that one has turned in the right direction.” Rorty makes it clear where the differences lie between himself and the ontotheological tradition—and more generally, speculative philosophy—as he advocates a sort of atheistic but spiritual relativism. Responding to a homily by the then Cardinal

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21. Ibid.
Ratzinger, which speaks of “a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive,” Rorty dons the relativist mantle willingly—something he resisted in earlier writings—and in the process, clarifies the nature of his relativism. But it is founded on a non-relativist dogma that there is no structure of human existence in which ideals are founded and which therefore leaves ideals as relative because they serve the purpose of increasing human happiness. He says:

Philosophers such as Santayana and Mill do indeed refuse to recognize anything as definitive. This is because they think that every reported object of philosophical speculation or of religious worship is a product of the human imagination. Someday it may be replaced by a better object. There is no destined end to this process of replacement, no point at which we can claim to have found the correct ideal once and for all. There is nothing already in existence to which our moral convictions should try to correspond.

So rather than being “carried about by every wind of doctrine” as the Pope Emeritus (quoting the writer to the Ephesians) describes relativists, Rorty takes the moral high ground, describing philosophers like himself as open to new ideas, willing to “consider all suggestions about what might increase human happiness” and claiming that this doctrinal openness “is the only way to avoid the evils of the past.”

Rorty clarifies his atypical use of the terms ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘relativism’ that allows him to refer to the then Pope as fundamentalist and himself as relativist; fundamentalism is the view that “ideals are valid only when grounded in reality” (as opposed to the more typical understanding that sees religious fundamentalism as a naive invocation of scripture). Adopting this meaning allows Rorty to define relativism as the denial of fundamentalism; at a minimum, presumably, ideals can be valid even if not grounded in reality. However, Rorty goes further and confuses the issue: “Relativists on this definition are those who believe that we would be better off without such notions as

25. Ratzinger, “Homily of His Eminence, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals.”
unconditional moral obligations grounded in the structure of human existence.”\(^{27}\) But this explicit definition of relativism introduces a value judgment (“we would be better off”) not found in the denial of fundamentalism as a belief that ideals are grounded in reality. Does this matter? Only because Rorty’s explicit definition doesn’t actually tackle the question of whether ideals are or are not grounded in reality; it only says we would be better off without that notion (thus raising the question of “better off by whose standards?”). Is this because the notion is wrong or simply unpragmatic? This brings us to the heart of the question of Rorty’s view on truth. Does he think his liberal ironic pragmatism is the way forward because he really does regard truth (with respect to ideals in the current discussion) as nonsensical, or is truth for Rorty simply unattainable? Or is it that he believes that because the latter is true (!) then so is the former (a move that, later in this thesis, I will call a fallacy of ontological entailment)?

Rorty quotes Ratzinger and says that Mill, Dewey, and Habermas (and by implication Rorty himself) share the cardinal’s view of relativism: “The cardinal summarized the relativists’ line of argument as follows: ‘Democracy is said to be founded on no one’s being able to claim to know the right way forward. It draws life from all the ways acknowledging each other as fragmentary attempts at improvement and trying to agree in common through dialogue. A free society is said to be a relativistic society. Only on this condition can it remain free and open-ended.’”\(^{28}\) Further expounding his own view, Rorty says that the three philosophers he mentions share in a view of truth as “what wins out in the free market of ideas rather than correspondence to an antecedent reality” and that they see democracy as essentially relativist in Rorty’s sense because it is based on “the idea that nothing is sacred because everything is up for discussion.”\(^{29}\)

While Ratzinger acknowledges the validity of some relativity in the realms of politics and society, such relativity is not unlimited, and when politics tries to be redemptive, he says, it has usurped the work of God. Rorty agrees that politics should

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 11.  
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 11-12.  
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 12.
not try to be redemptive, but not because redemption is God’s business; rather because “redemption was a bad idea in the first place. Human beings need to be made happier, but they do not need to be redeemed.”\textsuperscript{30} Humans according to Rorty are not “degraded beings, not immaterial souls imprisoned in material bodies, not innocent souls corrupted by original sin.” Rather they are Nietzsche’s ‘clever animals’ that have grown through history to be cooperative, to be “brave, imaginative, idealistic, self-improving.”\textsuperscript{31}

So, rejecting Ratzinger’s Platonic spirituality, which is rooted in the infinite and the possibility of immortality, Rorty affirms a secular spirituality consisting of “an exalted sense of new possibilities opening up for finite beings.”\textsuperscript{32} The difference between these two views of spirituality is that between “the hope to transcend finitude and the hope for a world in which human beings live far happier lives than they live at the present time.”\textsuperscript{33} And, he says, “though largely Christian in its original inspiration, the political idealism of modern times has no need or use for the idea that there is something over and above what Cardinal Ratzinger called ‘the ego and its desires.’”\textsuperscript{34}

Rorty’s utilitarianism is clear; for him, no desires are bad in themselves although some do obstruct the overall satisfaction of desire: “there is no such thing as intrinsically evil desire.”\textsuperscript{35} Rorty describes Peter Singer’s idea of “enlarging the circle of the ‘we’” as a case where relativism leads to beneficial change.\textsuperscript{36} One such change occurs as poverty and wealth are seen as mutable rather than immutable social institutions and the rich see the poor as fellow citizens rather than ordained by God to their station in life. Similarly, he says, the success of feminism and the growing heterosexual understanding of homosexuals are examples where a Rortian relativism has provoked a change for the better.

However, Rorty is not convincing; there is no reason to assume that “enlarging the circle of the ‘we’” cannot occur based on an enlarged or changed understanding of

\begin{itemize}
\item[in\textsuperscript{30}] Ibid., 13.
\item[in\textsuperscript{31}] Ibid.
\item[in\textsuperscript{32}] Ibid., 14.
\item[in\textsuperscript{33}] Ibid.
\item[in\textsuperscript{34}] Ibid., 15.
\item[in\textsuperscript{35}] Ibid.
\item[in\textsuperscript{36}] Ibid.
\end{itemize}
what norms are immutable. That is, while Rorty claims that it is the movement in thinking from fundamentalism (as he defines it) to relativism that leads to the benefits he cites, others—Christians included—might say that a better understanding of, or a revision of, what are understood to be immutable norms, lies at the heart of, and motivates, social changes for the better. Christians would say that to the extent that it believed historically that slavery or the inequality of the sexes are rooted in an immutable order, the Church, to that extent, was wrong. And not only that, but the very reason that those past positions can be criticised is on the basis of new understandings based on the immutability of the equal dignity of all human beings rooted in being made in the image of God.

Rorty finishes his paper by complicating an already confused discussion. He raises the question of how to decide between the Jamesian view that “any desire has a right to be fulfilled, if it does not interfere with the fulfilment of other desires” and the view of those who see “certain desires and acts as intrinsically evil.” Such a decision cannot be made, he says, on the basis of philosophical reflection—which, rather than constraining the imagination, is in fact one of the products of the human imagination. Nor can a choice be made on any particular reading of history, which would be simply one among many readings.

The answer, for Rorty, is that “our choice between alternative principles is determined by our preferences between possible futures for humanity.” Neither the reasoning of philosophy nor the experience of history offers a neutral court of appeal and so, for self-described relativists like Rorty, the struggle is between “two great products of the human imagination;” Ratzinger’s view appeals to a truth greater than humanity while the relativist’s vision holds that “there never was, and never will be, a truth that is greater than we are. The very idea of such a truth is a confusion of ideals with power.”

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37. Ibid., 16.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 13, 17.
40. Ibid., 17.
What are we to make of Rorty’s defence of relativism over fundamentalism as he has defined them? Rorty’s disarming turn of phrase makes the lack of rigour less transparent but before criticising him for a lack of philosophical rigour, his own words against the possibility of resolving such matters through philosophical reflection need to be remembered. Hasn’t he closed off the possibility of criticism with his appeal to preferences rather than philosophy? According to his own criteria, his writing need not claim to be rigorous because it is just one product of the human imagination.

This sort of defence simply won’t work and despite his clear statements, one doubts if Rorty would explicitly appeal to it. He risks falling into reflexive incomprehensibility if he simply sloughs off the tradition of rational critical argument while all the while trying to say something serious, something true—in fact, as long as he is trying to say anything at all. Whatever he says, he comes under critical judgment to see if his communication points to truth or not; ‘Is this the way things are?’ is the question we ask as we read his work which purports in its own self-deprecating way to be telling us about the way things really are.

I turn now to Rorty’s earlier and more substantial work in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* where he offers the substance of the arguments that undergird the conclusions outlined above. However, as we will see in elaborating HUFPaT, Rorty’s relativist conclusions about the possibility of what I am calling robust truth are not necessarily entailed by his critique of a particular theory of truth.

*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is a sustained attack on the correspondence theory of truth; according to Rorty, philosophy lost its way by accepting an incoherent model that postulates representations in the mind, of a world external to the mind. On this erroneous view, truth lies in a correct ‘correspondence’ between the so-called ‘real’ world and the representation which is reflected in the mirror of the mind and which is immediately present to consciousness: “the picture which holds traditional philosophy captive is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations—some accurate, some not—and capable of being

41. Rorty, *Mirror of Nature*. Rorty’s substantive argument against representationalism is found in the second of the three parts of the work.
studied by pure, nonempirical methods.”42 This picture views knowledge as representation and led Descartes and Kant to the strategy of “getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror, so to speak,”43 and so resulted in setting the agenda for philosophy.

Rorty’s principal argument against traditional understandings of truth is found in his criticism of the ‘appearance-reality distinction’ at the heart of the correspondence theory. If truth lies in correspondence between how the world appears (expressed through human sentences or propositions), in contrast to reality or the world ‘in itself’, then, says Rorty, such a notion is meaningless because “we have no idea what ‘in itself’ is supposed to mean in the phrase ‘reality as it is in itself.’”44 Despite our familiarity with such a way of speaking, he says, rightly, that we can make no sense of a ‘world in itself’ that is not always and already a product of our cultural and linguistic practices, and that “there are many ways to talk about what is going on,” but concludes, wrongly, in my view, that “none of them gets closer to the way things are in themselves than any other.”45 So, Rorty claims, highlighting his pragmatic position, “the notion of ‘accurate representation’ is simply an automatic and empty compliment which we pay to those beliefs which are successful in helping us do what we want to do.”46 In fact, “we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation.”47 Philosophy would be better off without the notions of ‘intrinsic nature of reality’ and ‘correspondence to reality.’48 Therefore, Rorty concludes, it is best to drop the appearance-reality distinction in favor of speaking of ‘useful’ and ‘less useful’ ways of talking.49

Rorty claims as allies Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, all of whom he describes as agreeing that “the notion of knowledge as accurate representation, made

42. Ibid., 12.
43. Ibid.
44. Rorty, Truth and Progress, 1.
45. Ibid.
46. Rorty, Mirror of Nature, 10.
47. Ibid., 170.
49. Ibid., 1.
possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation, needs to be abandoned.”

This view of knowledge as accurate representation, as Heidegger explained, is based on adopting the model of visual perception for our relation to objects, and, says Rorty, this contingent choice of metaphor resulted in the “wish to substitute confrontation [with that which compels the mind to belief as soon as it is unveiled] for conversation as the determinant of our belief.”

The implications of undoing this thinking are, according to Rorty, profound: “To think of knowledge [as that] which presents a ‘problem,’ and about which we ought to have a ‘theory,’ is a product of viewing knowledge as an assemblage of representations—a view of knowledge which … was a product of the seventeenth century. The moral to be drawn is that if this way of thinking of knowledge is optional, then so is epistemology, and so is philosophy, as it has understood itself since the middle of the last century.”

Having turned away from representationalism, and the associated view of knowledge, Rorty holds that when we have justified our knowledge through consensus there is nothing more to be done. He calls this view ‘epistemological behaviourism’, reflecting an attitude he finds in Dewey and Wittgenstein, which involves taking empirical human behaviour associated with knowledge claims as the basis for those claims, and which stands against the view that such claims need to be rooted in some form of privileged representations in the mind in order to be justified: “explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call ‘epistemological behaviourism’.”

So, he says, “if assertions are justified by society rather than by the character of the inner representations they express, then there is no point in attempting to isolate privileged representations.” On this view, if we understand the rules of the

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51. Ibid., 163.
52. Ibid., 136.
53. Ibid., 174.
54. Ibid.
epistemic language game then we have understood all that there is to understand about why such moves in that language game are made.

Rorty recognises that such a move might be criticised for begging the question, and asks: “Is there any reason to think that fundamental epistemic notions should be explicated in behavioural terms?” In other words, “Can we treat the study of ‘the nature of human knowledge’ just as the study of certain ways in which human beings interact, or does it require an ontological foundation (involving some specifically philosophical way of describing human beings)?”55 Rorty’s answer is that ontological connections are not necessary, because, understood from an epistemological behaviourist viewpoint, a claim to knowledge, such as ‘David knows that p’ is simply a remark about the status of David’s reports among his peers and is not a remark about the relation between subject and object, between mirror and the nature mirrored. This leads to a pragmatic view of truth and what Rorty calls a therapeutic approach to ontology that leaves philosophy in the role of clarifying the conversation, but without offering “any arguments of its own for the existence or inexistence of something.”56 According to Rorty, the alternative to this pragmatic behavioural epistemology is some sort of indefensible ontological explanation that relates “minds and meanings, minds and immediate data of awareness, universals and particulars, thought and language, consciousness and brains, and so on.”57

Rorty acknowledges the arguments of some that if the realism of common sense is to be preserved then there must be an explanation that will make truth more than “what our peers will, ceteris paribus, let us get away with saying.”58 However, such explanations usually try in vain to bridge the gap between object and knowing subject; for Rorty, the choice is between the pragmatic view of truth as “what it is good for us to believe” and an incoherent view of truth as “contact with reality.”59 To adopt a

55. Ibid., 175.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 176.
59. Ibid. Although by the time of Truth and Progress Rorty was more cautious about describing truth as ‘what it is good for us to believe.’ See below.
behaviourist view is to “refuse to attempt a certain sort of explanation” which interposes an acquaintance with meanings or with sensory appearances “between the impact of the environment on human beings and their reports about it” and then uses these explanations “to explain the reliability of such reports.”\(^6^0\) According to Rorty, the question of a grounding in nature is an incoherent one; once we have understood from a historical point of view when and why certain beliefs have been adopted, there is nothing more concerning the so-called “relation of knowledge to reality” to explicate.\(^6^1\)

In explaining this incoherent expectation, Rorty introduces an analogy with morality: just as the pragmatist in morals cannot see what it would be like for moral customs to be grounded, for example in human nature, the epistemological behaviorist cannot make sense of the question of grounding epistemic claims in a correspondence with reality. So Rorty describes his attitude to correspondence as that of Heidegger, and of Peter Strawson whom he quotes: “The correspondence theory requires, not purification, but elimination,”\(^6^2\) or, in Rorty’s own words, “more mildly, it requires separation from epistemology and relegation to semantics.”\(^6^3\) However, as we will see later, while Heidegger too does away with a strict correspondence theory due to its problematic ontology, he does not do away with the idea of truth as correctness.

Rorty recognises that for most people, who think that “truth is correspondence to the way reality ‘really is’ … this will look like an argument that there is no truth.”\(^6^4\) He characterises such critics as holding to a progressive understanding of truth, believing for example that primitive science and a morality justifying slaveholding were wrong, while “modern physicists, like believers in universal human rights, know what is really going on.”\(^6^5\) So while on the one hand, as we have seen, he does away with a traditional understanding of truth as some sort of correspondence to a world beyond human descriptions and claims, on the other hand, he denies doing away with truth altogether.

\(^6^0\) Ibid.
\(^6^1\) Ibid., 178.
\(^6^3\) Rorty, Mirror of Nature, 179.
\(^6^4\) Rorty, Truth and Progress, 1-2.
\(^6^5\) Ibid., 1.
Nobody says there is no truth,\textsuperscript{66} he says, apparently (in 1998) rejecting charges of relativism and of denuding ‘true’ and ‘false’ of their substantive senses. He even argues that he has an absolute conception of truth: “Truth is, to be sure, an absolute notion, in the following sense: ‘true for me but not for you’ and ‘true in my culture but not in yours’ are weird, pointless locutions.”\textsuperscript{67} On the other hand he says, justification is relative to people and circumstances, so James (and Rorty himself?) “would, indeed, have done better to say that phrases like ‘the good in the way of belief’ and ‘what it is better for us to believe’ are interchangeable with ‘justified’ rather than with ‘true.’”\textsuperscript{68} Nevertheless, despite this conceptual distinction between justification and truth, we have, Rorty says rightly, “no criterion of truth other than justification” and that justification will always be relative to audiences and ranges of truth candidates, just as goodness is relative to purposes and rightness is relative to situations. So, he says, “granted that ‘true’ is an absolute term, its conditions of application will always be relative,” and despite the fact that “there are plenty of beliefs … about which nobody with whom we bother to argue has any doubt,” no justification is ever sufficient to remove all possible doubt.\textsuperscript{69}

On one understanding, Rorty might sound like he is toeing a provisionalist line which accepts that while truth is an absolute notion consisting of correspondence to a “non-description-relative, intrinsic nature of reality,”\textsuperscript{70} nevertheless our knowledge of that reality is always provisional, justified as it is within the inevitable limitations of human practices. Therefore, on this line of thinking, “the criterion of truth” (justification) is relative but “the nature of truth” would remain as correspondence to reality. But Rorty denies that he can be interpreted this way: “to get around this argument, we followers of James and Nietzsche deny one of its premises: namely, that truth is correspondence with reality.” Rorty insists that his understanding of truth is not a representationalist one of truth as “a word–world relation such as ‘fitting’ or

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 1-2.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 2.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 3.
\end{itemize}
‘correspondence’ or ‘accurate representation’. So he is dismissive of the controversies concerning the correspondence theory of truth or a possible successor theory, seeing such questions as “leading nowhere.” In the face of demands to produce an alternative theory of truth, Rorty pays tribute to Donald Davidson who “helped us realize that the very absoluteness of truth is a good reason for thinking ‘true’ indefinable and for thinking that no theory of the nature of truth is possible.”

Rorty also argues that truth is unserviceable as a goal of enquiry, because its absoluteness means that one can never know if one is nearer or further from the truth. With justification as the only criterion, and justification being relative to the purposes and lights of an audience, the question of whether our justificatory practices lead to truth is, according to Rorty, both unanswerable and unpragmatic: “It is unanswerable because there is no way to privilege our current purposes and interests. It is unpragmatic because the answer to it would make no difference whatever to our practice.” Rorty responds to the challenge of those who would say, “surely … we know that we are closer to the truth,” by acknowledging a progress of sorts, but one which is relative to our cultural expectations: “we are much better able to serve the purposes we wish to serve, and to cope with the situations we believe we face, than our ancestors would have been.” But, he says, we can make no claims about our relationship to ‘Truth’ any more than we can talk of getting closer to Beauty or Goodness or Rightness. He says that this nominalisation of adjectives implies a Platonic realm that we approach with greater or lesser success but which fails to answer the sceptical question of whether we are making progress in approaching these absolutes. So, it seems that the lack of epistemic guarantees is, for Rorty, a reason for abandoning realism in science and in morality. He asks rhetorically: “How do we know that greater predictive power and greater control of the environment … gets us closer to truth, conceived of as an accurate representation of how things are in themselves, apart from human needs and interests? How do we know

71. Ibid.
72. Ibid., 11.
73. Ibid., 3.
74. Ibid., 4.
75. Ibid.
that increased health, security, equality of opportunity, longevity, freedom from humiliation, and similar indices of greater human flourishing are indices of moral or political progress?" 76 “We don’t!” is Rorty’s implied reply to both questions.

So what should we make of the idea of progress? According to Rorty, giving up the appearance-reality distinction means offering separate accounts of progress in science and in morality, neither of which describes progress as somehow related to the intrinsic nature of reality. 77 In the case of science—a necessary condition of which, is, according to Rorty, the ability to make predictions—Rorty’s self-described “left-wing Kuhnianism” 78 enlists Thomas Kuhn in arguing that progress is not to be understood as approaching truth, but rather, science progresses when it makes predictions and thereby “enables us … to influence what will happen.” 79 While a more realist account might say that science is able to make accurate predictions because it gets reality approximately right, Rorty calls this an incantation rather than an explanation for predictive success, “because we have no test for the explanans distinct from our test for the explanandum … it seems enough simply to define scientific progress as an increased ability to make predictions.” 80 With Kuhn, Rorty sees progress as the ability to solve not only old problems but also new ones. But while Newton progressed over Aristotle, Einstein over Newton, “neither came closer to the truth, or to the intrinsic character of reality, than any of the others.” 81

With respect to moral progress, Rorty claims: “Once one gives up on the idea that we have become less cruel and treat each other better because we have more fully grasped the true nature of human beings or of human rights or of human obligations (more pseudo-explanations), it seems enough to define moral progress as becoming like ourselves at our best (people who are not racist, not aggressive, not intolerant, etc.,

76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., 5.
79. Rorty, Truth and Progress, 5.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid., 7.
The essence of morality then, is to see differences of race or gender or religion as irrelevant to cooperation for mutual benefit and the need to alleviate suffering. And, characteristic of his unabashed ethnocentricty, Rorty promotes a “Western liberal picture of a global democratic utopia [which] is that of a planet on which all members of the species are concerned about the fates of all the other members.”

But, he says, although historically one society has progressed over another in achieving this goal, “none of these societies was closer to the Demand of Morality.” In fact the suggestion that progress can be defined as a recognition of the existence of human rights, for example, should be interpreted as: “they conformed more closely to the way we wealthy, secure, educated inhabitants of the First World think people should treat one another.” And, while such a view is quite justified, according to Rorty, nevertheless, “we cannot check our view of the matter against the intrinsic nature of moral reality.”

It is a pointless question to ask whether such rights exist apart from human discourse, just as it is pointless to ask about the existence of sub-atomic particles: “human rights are no more or less ‘objective’ than quarks, but this is just to say that reference to human rights is as indispensable to debates in the UN Security Council as is reference to quarks in debates in the Royal Society.” The indispensability of this ascription of the causal independence of rights or quarks from discourse is part of the way we talk about them and should not be confused with being a “mark of reality as opposed to appearance.” Rorty continues: “Anybody who doesn’t know this fact about quarks is as unlikely to grasp what they are as is somebody who thinks that human rights were there before humans. We can say, with Foucault, that both human rights and homosexuality are recent social constructions, but only if we say, with Bruno Latour, that quarks are too. There is no point to saying that the former are ‘just’ social constructions, for all the reasons that could be used to back up this claim are reasons

82. Ibid., 5.
83. Ibid., 12.
84. Ibid., 7.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid., 7-8.
87. Ibid., 8.
that would apply to quarks as well.”88 Having done away with “the notion of the intrinsic nature of reality,” you also “get rid of the notion that quarks and human rights differ in ‘ontological status’,” which in turn removes natural science from its privileged epistemic position as paradigm for other discourses.89

2.3 Comments on Rorty

*Rorty’s crypto-foundationalism*

What are we to make of this view of truth and knowledge that detaches it from a putative connection to the real world in order to deal with the difficulties of proving what often seems patently obvious to common sense? I believe Rorty’s views are the outcome of his acceptance of both an unnecessary Cartesian assumption that indubitable belief is a prerequisite of knowledge, and his correct recognition that we cannot have a grasp of the world that isn’t mediated by interpretive and dubitable practices. Rorty says rightly, and perhaps tritely, “truth and knowledge can only be judged by the standards of the inquirers of our own day.” And he goes on in a way reminiscent of Polanyi, to say, “nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and … there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence.”90 However, he also claims that nothing more can be said—talk of ontology has no import and is perhaps incoherent—and in so doing he allows for no distinction between truth and what is believed to be true. He decries “the philosophical urge … to say that assertions and actions must not only cohere with other assertions and actions but ‘correspond’ to something apart from what people are saying and doing.”91 His conclusion is: “If we accept these criticisms, and therefore drop the notion of epistemology as the quest, initiated by Descartes, for those privileged items in the field of consciousness which are the touchstones of truth, we are in a position to ask whether

88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
91. Ibid., 179.
there still remains something for epistemology to be. I want to urge that there does not."92

At this point Rorty reveals his hand; he can conceive of no other way to do epistemology. Apparently frustrated with the failure of the Cartesian project that would give sure answers to such questions, Rorty rightly recognises that the only viable criterion of truth is our justificatory practices. But in so doing, rather than adopting a fallibilism or provisionalism that acknowledges an inevitable epistemic gap between justification and reality, between what is believed to be true and what is true, he says that this distinction is nonsensical, preferring neither to talk of, nor recognise, a way of discussing what lies on the other side of the gap.93 I suggest this move arises not from the logic of arguments about truth but from his understandable pragmatic and politically motivated desire to move on from intractable philosophical debates. But it is the preference of one committed to a Cartesian epistemology who is weary of the “increasingly tiresome pendulum swing” between dogmatism and scepticism that arises “as long as we try to project from the relative and conditioned to the absolute and unconditioned."94 For Rorty, the only way to stop the pendulum is through the cultural change of reforming what is taken to be common sense. So he wants to change “the intuitions available for being pumped up by philosophical arguments."95

I now offer further brief criticisms of Rorty before moving on in this chapter to the views of Hirsch, and in following chapters to an outline of HUPaT as an alternative way of bypassing the intractable debates of philosophy: a way that accepts the difficulties Rorty outlines—as Hirsch does not—but does not follow Rorty to such counter-intuitive conclusions.


93. Michael Williams suggests that Rorty’s ironism is skepticism under another name and that Rorty fails to keep the distinction between fallibilism and skepticism clear. See Michael Williams, “Rorty on Knowledge and Truth,” in Richard Rorty, ed. Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76.

94. Rorty, Truth and Progress, 4.

95. Ibid.
Rorty’s performative contradiction

While Rorty claims to be working within culture and language and not drawing on notions of reality, it seems that he tangles himself in what Habermas calls a ‘performative contradiction’, which involves self-referential inconsistency, in this case by making use of concepts such as truth and reality while at the same time denying them.96 He incorporates notions of ‘how things really are’ in his discussion and he makes truth claims that assume a knowledge of extra-human reality while at the same time denying that possibility.97 Likewise when he uses phrases such as coping “with the situations we believe we face,”98 he assumes an appearance-reality distinction by contrasting our beliefs, which might be wrong, with a situation that we actually face despite our belief that it is otherwise. When he says, “we have no criterion of truth other than justification,”99 he uses ‘truth’ in a substantive sense: he does not mean we have no criterion for defining the word ‘truth’, but rather, that we have no means of access to truth except through our justificatory processes. This is clear when he says in the same context that “James would, indeed, have done better to say that phrases like ‘the good in the way of belief’ and ‘what it is better for us to believe’ are interchangeable with ‘justified’ rather than with ‘true.’”100 But if ‘criterion’ means something like a means of access then Rorty implicitly recognises truth as distinct from justification although

97. Rorty acknowledges this criticism levelled at him by, for example, Habermas and Apel when he says, “my own view is that we do not need, either in epistemology or in moral philosophy, the notion of universal validity. I argue for this in ‘Sind Aussagen Universelle Geltungsansprüche?’ in Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie 42(1994) 6, pp. 975-88. Habermas and Apel find my view paradoxical and likely to produce performative self-contradiction.” See Richard Rorty, “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” Ethical Perspectives 4, 2 (1997): 148, n.13. Apel says of what he calls Rorty’s “de-transcendentalization” that “it ultimately entails a step into the nonsensical. Thus, for example, the unavoidable presuppositions of argumentation (which cannot be denied without committing a performative self-contradiction) cannot be fallible and subject to empirical tests, because in case of falsification they would simultaneously be presupposed in their transcendental function. For the same reason it makes no sense, I suggest, to imagine that one fine day the presuppositions of argumentation could change, for the question would be: from where—i.e. under which presuppositions— could we think of these presuppositions as being contingent?” Karl-Otto Apel, “Regarding the Relationship of Morality, Law and Democracy,” in Habermas and Pragmatism, ed. Mitchell Aboulafia, Myra Bookman, and Cathy Kemp (London: Routledge, 2002), 19. Apel’s italics.
98. Rorty, Truth and Progress, 4.
99. Ibid., 2.
100. Ibid.
inaccessible. By holding that truth has no use, he elides truth with our beliefs about the world instead of making the fiduciary leap that might say, for instance, “I know that my beliefs may be false, but I nevertheless believe that the claim of science that ‘climate change is human-induced’ is a true proposition about the world in itself.” In short, as Pleasants says: “In the very act of renouncing ‘metaphysical’ philosophy, and general theories of ‘the way things really are’ ... Rorty presents an alternative ontological picture and general theory of ‘the way things really are’.”

**Rorty’s pragmatism is unpragmatic**

There are a number of ways in which Rorty’s views fail the pragmatic test of usefulness because they do not recognise that convictions about objective truth do ‘make a difference’. For example, the power of human rights discourse lies in a belief, opaque as it is, that human rights are rooted in some sort of reality beyond a Western liberal language game or useful fiction. Rorty is right that rational argument is not sufficient, but rhetorical persuasion too depends on its ringing true. Rorty says, “we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief,” but an essential part of the social justification and persuasive power of knowledge claims lies in their being believed to be true in virtue of some sort of relationship to reality. Rorty’s unmasking of knowledge also unmasks and neutralises its power to persuade. While philosophically this might be an acceptable outcome it cannot be so for a pragmatist with utopian dreams of promoting the conversation of humankind. Knowledge that makes no claim to robust truth is powerless and hence unpragmatic.

**Rorty’s confidence in consensus and progress**

Associated with the unpragmatic nature of Rorty’s proposals is the importance he places on common cultural values: “What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes.” But there are many who would disagree, for

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103. Rorty, *Contingency*, 86.
example, with his egalitarianism. At one end of the spectrum some not-so-liberals would argue that race or gender or religion do in fact make for moral distinctions, while at the other end, there are those who might charge Rorty with speciesism for leaving non-human animals out of his egalitarian picture. Rorty’s response no doubt would be to make his view attractive through rhetoric and imagination, but having lost the persuasive power of the appeal to truth, the pragmatic virtues of his proposal seem dubitable at least, and perhaps totally unpersuasive.

Rorty’s description of progress in science and in morality is also revealing as he effectively substitutes one set of criteria for progress (‘approaching truth’) for another that is just as difficult to define and which is subject to the same sorts of ‘I don’t know what that would mean’ arguments that he uses against ‘the world in itself’. Rorty’s ‘the best we can be’ makes his utopia as hard to define as any other moral vision, and in Rortian style I suggest that his ‘our best’ is an incantation, a pseudo-explanation, appealing as it does to indefinable cultural intuitions. Prediction in science and ‘our best’ in morality are both obscure terms susceptible to the same sorts of critique that Rorty is keen to leave behind by not talking of truth as correspondence. Inevitably, truth re-enters the scene along with fallibility. In science we ask if this experimental result is or is not what was predicted and we offer a justificatory story when we argue with those who say that the result we invoke is not in fact an example of a successful prediction. Meanwhile in moral discussion, Rorty only moves the discussion from one of whether, for example, ‘universal human rights’ exist to one of whether in fact humans at their best are not racist.

Faced with the impossibility of offering sure grounds for knowledge rooted in an objective external reality, Rorty ironically continues the search for apodictic truth by redefining truth and knowledge so that they are grounded in intersubjective justificatory practices. Knowledge remains as justified true belief but ‘true’ becomes redundant, defined as the outcome of those practices. While Rorty is right that we cannot discuss the world without the language of beliefs, this does not mean that conceptually we do not draw the distinction between truth and justification and find the distinction essential in making sense of the language of belief. In an act of philosophical self-harm Rorty
cuts off his nose and refuses to continue the conversation; it seems that if he can’t have the sort of truth that the Cartesian project has sought, then he won’t have anything like it.

The possibility that Rorty does not consider is that of accepting our intuitions about some sort of correspondence between beliefs and our ‘world’ and allowing that while we find that correspondence difficult to characterise, it is still our only way of making rational or pragmatic sense of the world. For the purposes of this thesis, there is no need to argue further with Rorty. Rather, I want to present another way of approaching human knowledge that recognises the sorts of problems that Rorty is concerned about but nevertheless allows us to hold on to our fundamental intuitions that make the human conversation possible. But before doing so I will consider briefly the arguments of E. D. Hirsch who, although focusing on textual interpretation, represents the opposite pole to Rorty as he argues for the possibility of fixed objective truth independent of the human knower.

2.4 Hirsch’s foundationalist hermeneutics

E. D. Hirsch, a prominent critic and educator, and professor emeritus at the University of Virginia, has been a significant voice in challenging the hermeneutic turn in the human sciences and arguing for the objectivity of textual knowledge. In fact, in the words of M. J. Valdés, Hirsch has been a “rallying cry of outrage” who gave literary theory “one of its most rewarding debates,”104 and the ongoing significance of Hirsch as a serious interlocutor in discussion of philosophical hermeneutics is evidenced, for example, by the fact that Merold Westphal devotes a chapter of a 2009 work to rebutting Hirsch’s work of some 40 years earlier.105

Influenced by Emilio Betti,106 who is little-translated into English, Hirsch’s project is to resist the ontological aspects and implications of an approach to textual

interpretation informed by Heidegger and Gadamer on the grounds that such an approach introduces an unacceptable relativism. The lynchpin of Hirsch’s argument is the maintenance of a clear demarcation between meaning and significance, the first being defined by the original author’s intention and the latter by the varying applications and interpretations of readers or hearers. While Hirsch focuses specifically on texts, his resistance to the implications of the Heideggerian turn in the area of textual interpretation also serves as a foil for the argument of this thesis, since one aspect of HUFPaT’s universality is that what is true of textual interpretation is, following Heidegger and Gadamer, true of all human knowing. So HUFPaT, in offering a way to robust truth in general, also responds to those such as Hirsch, who are concerned about relativism in specifically textual interpretation.

Hirsch’s discussion has both ontological and epistemological dimensions. Ontologically Hirsch holds to a particular view of meaning in interpretation that says there is one fixed, discrete meaning defined by authorial intention, although, as we will see, in a later revision of his views, this fixed meaning is also open with “room for maneuver.”¹⁰⁷ Hirsch also holds that there is an unchanging common human nature, which is an essential condition, Hirsch believes, for the possibility of correctness in interpretation across a temporal distance.¹⁰⁸ But, as will become clear, a Heideggerian ontology undermines the credibility of such a rigidly fixed human nature and of the objective existence of textual meaning totally independent of the interpreter. This results in the impression that Hirsch is begging crucial questions, or at least not offering a justification for his assumptions, by taking fixed authorial intent and human nature as axioms, rather than responding to the Heideggerian ontological challenge.

Epistemologically, while Hirsch recognises the provisionality of human judgments, he nevertheless seems to think that, ideally speaking, there is a possibility of access to truth not mediated by those judgments. So, like Rorty, Hirsch believes that allowing that truth is encountered through the responsible and provisional judgments of experts and furthermore that meanings are co-constituted between texts and interpreters, can only

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 212-213.
lead to a radical form of relativism. While Rorty is unconcerned about this possibility, and while Hirsch resists it, I will read those such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Polanyi to support a view of truth that does not entail a problematic form of relativism; provisional but robust truth is possible.

In his 1978 work, *The Aims of Interpretation*, Hirsch’s second major monograph on the subject) which responds to critics of his 1967 work, *Validity in Interpretation*, he decries the “cognitive atheism,” of those such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida, which assumes that all knowledge is relative, and he attributes such conclusions to the erroneous adoption of the visual metaphor of perspective. Hirsch says that such “tough-minded cognitive atheism usually tends to be an emotional given rather than a developed system,” and he points to the performative inconsistency inherent in a doctrine of otherwise universal relativism, which holds firmly to the truth of the doctrine of critical relativity. The crucial issue, Hirsch believes, is that in order to defend “the possibility of knowledge in interpretation” he must argue for “the stable determinacy of meaning,” without which there can be no non-relativistic knowledge. However, in a 1984 paper, Hirsch’s “determinacy” becomes a little less determinate as he responds to views such as those of Gadamer by allowing for open, unforseen meanings of a text, while at the same time continuing to hold to the idea of meaning being defined by a fixed authorial intention.

I will briefly outline Hirsch’s earlier views and then his later change of mind about the nature of textual meaning before suggesting that his partial repudiation still does not do justice to the fullness of meaning and truth in textual interpretation or to the ontological foundations on which it rests. These dimensions, resisted by Hirsch, will be explored in the chapters that follow, as I make it clear that there is a middle way

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112. Ibid., 13, 39-40.
113. Ibid., 36-37.
114. Ibid., 36.
between the poles represented by Hirsch and Rorty. I will then return to further discussion of the nature and so-called danger of relativism in the concluding chapter.

Judging by the significant place it continues to have in discussion of interpretation, Hirsch’s view is attractive to those who want to hold on to a grounded view of the world and the context of human communication. If convincingly defended, a sharp distinction between the objectivity of original meaning and the subjective significance that people make of the original text or communication (or for that matter, artwork or the phenomena of science), offers an escape from the perceived relativist abyss of totally indeterminate meanings and truth. But, as we will see in the following chapters, such a way is not convincing because it fails to take into account ontological dimensions, which mean, in Hirschian terms, that there is no meaning that is not jointly constituted by ‘significance’ and that is not based in authorial intentions and a ‘human nature’ that are fluid and co-constituted in the unified phenomenon of what Heidegger calls Being-in-the-world.

According to Hirsch, the distinction between meaning and significance is a distinction in interpretive theory of the more general epistemological distinction that he finds in Husserl between the inner and the outer horizon of all acts of knowing, and, says Hirsch, his meaning–significance distinction is essential “for comprehending how meaning could be stable and determinate, and hence how interpretive knowledge is possible.” For Hirsch, meaning refers to “the whole verbal meaning of a text,” as found solely in the author’s intention, while significance concerns “textual meaning in relation to a larger context, i.e., another mind, another era, a wider subject matter, an alien system of values, and so on. In other words, ‘significance’ is textual meaning as related to some context, indeed any context, beyond itself.” In his earlier work, *Validity in Interpretation*, he puts it this way: “Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the

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119. Ibid., 2-3.
signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable.\(^{120}\) So, in responding to the challenge raised by the possibility of an author later claiming that their own text does not now mean what it meant when they wrote it, Hirsch says that while an author may ostensibly repudiate the meaning of their own earlier work, they actually do so on the basis that its significance has changed. But, says Hirsch, this can only occur if the original meaning remains unchanged (hence leaving something to be repudiated).\(^{121}\) Hirsch says that this meaning–significance distinction is “crucial to the determinacy and stability of meaning and hence to the possibility of hermeneutical knowledge,” and he refers to those who insist that the distinction is artificial as “dogmatic relativists” as well as “cognitive atheists.”\(^{122}\) Hirsch attributes this resistance to his position to its entailments rather than the actual position itself: his critics, he believes, have a prior commitment to a view that entails a radical relativism,\(^{123}\) which his distinction between fixed meaning and relative significance rules out. Hirsch claims that the distinction between meaning and significance is natural and “universal in our experience,” seen, for example, when we recognise an object today that we saw yesterday: “an experienced sameness of a content (or object) despite the differentness of the context in which we know it, proves real the distinction between an object of knowledge and the context in which it is known.” He says the distinction is one that cannot be avoided in order to live in the world and that denying it is “an abstract consequence of a previously assumed psychological or historical relativism.”\(^{124}\)

In his 1984 “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted,” Hirsch revises his meaning–significance distinction “to improve its accuracy” but continues to hold, against the positions of those such as Gadamer who insist that meanings go beyond original authorial intentions, that meaning is “something that stays the same in different

\(^{120}\) Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 8.
\(^{121}\) Ibid., 7-8.
\(^{122}\) Hirsch, *The Aims of Interpretation*, 3.
\(^{123}\) Ibid.
\(^{124}\) Ibid.
In this later work, Hirsch also recognises that intentions can to some degree be open but within fixed bounds that are determined by authorial intention: meaning can be understood as “a self-identical schema whose boundaries are determined by an originating speech event.” Significance, for its part, is “a relationship drawn between that self-identical meaning and something, anything, else.” The reason Hirsch’s original view of meaning needs to be elaborated further, he says, is because authors can have intentions that are open to the future.

However, such a move is unconvincing in the light of the views Heidegger and Gadamer to come: it raises an insurmountable problem in its insistence on an unchangeable meaning. Hirsch recognises the problem: “such ad hoc futurity of intention produces a paradox for the theory that a text can be taken to represent a fixed meaning,” and attempts to describe how his, still fixed, meaning will allow of multiple actualisations. Citing a Shakespearean sonnet, he says the intent of the author is to communicate in unforseen future situations and this “historical intent” can be a “variable, future-oriented intent.” So, if the historical intent of the author is future-oriented then the actualisation of meaning can change in the future in that space left open deliberately by the author to incorporate future readers. “A future-directed intention is an explicit plan with areas of inexplicitness,” says Hirsch; a hammer too fulfils its maker’s intention even if a new class of nails is invented, unthought-of by hammer-makers. Even ordinary speech contains this futurity element, he says: “The speaker assumes that the present context will help his listener grasp his intention, but the listener’s present context will not be the speaker’s. Since speaking precedes listening, the present of the listener will come after the present of the speaker. Hence a speech-intention directed to a listener is always, to that minimal extent, a future-directed intention.” In other words, according to Hirsch, “the wide scope of the original

126. Ibid., 204.
127. Ibid., 205.
128. Ibid.
129. Ibid., 206.
130. Ibid.
textual intention”—for example in law or literature or religious writings—can be applied, still within the author’s intentions, in situations unthought-of by the author.\textsuperscript{131}

In sum, Hirsch has amended his previous view that variations in application of a text cannot be counted as lying within the boundaries of meaning. He says: “What I used to call ‘part of the present significance’ of a text is, so long as it belongs to the true extension of meaning, part of what does not change—that is, part of meaning itself.”\textsuperscript{132}

So, for Hirsch, meaning might be described as a trajectory: an open but circumscribed event defined by a fixed authorial intention. In such a description it seems that Hirsch is able to have his invariant meaning but to vary it too, adopting a ‘fixed but flexible’ meaning of meaning. If so, the question that arises is, what does “a self-identical schema” mean? If meaning is open then it is difficult to see how it can be identical to a fixed authorial intent.

Hirsch recognises that his change of mind is at least partly attributable to his engagement with Gadamer, especially with the latter’s insistence that application is an essential part of the interpretation process. Where the earlier Hirsch clearly differentiated between meaning and significance or application, his later revision sees that authorial meanings can extend to the application of a text. According to Hirsch, Gadamer “proposed to identify interpretation not just with the process of understanding (the \textit{subtilitas intellegere}) but also with the process of application (the \textit{subtilitas applicandi}).”\textsuperscript{133} But, as we will see, it is not clear that Hirsch has understood Gadamer here; Hirsch is using ‘interpretation’ in a way that does not do justice to the ontological dimension of hermeneutics and its ‘circular’ nature which is both epistemological and ontological. For Gadamer, as we will see in chapter 5, there is “one unified process” in which the hermeneutical act catches up different dimensions of understanding, interpretation, \textit{and} application.\textsuperscript{134}

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\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 209.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 210.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 211.
\textsuperscript{134} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 307.
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So, although he finds himself “very much in agreement with Gadamer’s idea that application can be part of meaning,” for Hirsch, this capaciousness of meaning, which allows it to extend to application, does not blur a distinction between meaning and significance: “certain present applications of a text may belong to its meaning rather than to its significance.” In addition, while this is a move in Gadamer’s direction by extending meaning to application, in order to avoid what he sees as relativist entailments, he still holds firmly to the fixity of this extended meaning—“the principle that meaning is the aspect of interpretation which remains the same”—rather than considering the possibility that meaning (understood by Hirsch as authorial intention) might be more fluid than fixed. While not saying as much, it appears that Hirsch wants to preserve a fixed origin from which meaning emanates and to which interpretation returns. Without that origin, there is, for Hirsch, no distinction between correct and incorrect interpretation; having lost the yardstick of a fixed meaning, there is nothing by which to measure correctness.

As noted above, Hirsch’s claim is not that the determinate meaning of a work is necessarily accessible or that judgments about that meaning are certain; while he holds that there is a true meaning, it may not be practically possible to identify it. Hence, he offers what is a useful description of the provisionality of judgments, which, as we will see, echoes Polanyi’s description of the provisional yet universal intent of scientific judgments. Hirsch distinguishes between the theoretical and practical aims of disciplines across the natural and human sciences, including valid textual interpretation. While the theoretical goal is the pursuit of truth, the practical aim is to achieve a consensus on the matter in hand, and such a distinction is necessary in the light of the

136. Ibid., 210.
137. Ibid.
138. I have used ‘provisional’, in the HUFPaT sense, for Hirsch’s description here. In fact, while I have adopted the word from Hirsch, it is only in his 1984 paper that he speaks of the provisionality of meaning. However Hirsch does not use the word to include the more encompassing ontological connotations that HUFPaT insists on.
ambiguity of the subject matter of interpretation and the uncertainty of conclusions. He rightly recognises that “certainty is not the same thing as validity.”

Hirsch also connects provisionality with the future in a way that ties in with Polanyi’s description of the fallible nature of scientific judgments and with the latter’s understanding that one of the marks of reality is the expectation that it will reveal itself in unexpected ways in the future. In both science and everyday affairs, Hirsch says, we have an “instinctive awareness of the provisionality of meaning.” Describing provisionality in a way that I adopt for HUFPaT—with the caveat that HUFPaT’s provisionality stems first from ontological conditions and then to epistemological entailments—Hirsch says: “‘Provisionality’ is a highly suitable word etymologically, since it implies futurity (pro-vision: ‘looking ahead’), and also implies, by common usage, tentativeness. We are tentative about our meanings because we are looking ahead. We know that in the future the conceptual content of our meanings may turn out to be not quite true. We speak ‘under correction,’ because we are uncertain about what will happen in the future, and we are also uncertain about the exactitude of our knowledge concerning the present and the past.”

So Hirsch argues that while “knowledge is possible even in textual interpretation” this does not amount to claiming “that knowledge has in fact been achieved in such and such a case, for we cannot know that we know.” However, this provisionality is not a recognition or result of the sort of radical human embeddedness in the world that we will encounter in Heidegger and Gadamer, and which, if accurate, calls into question Hirsch’s epistemology of the interpretation of texts. Hirsch does recognise the provisionality of knowing, but only as an unfortunate and contingent limitation on our epistemic ability and not in the ontologically necessary sense that HUFPaT will reveal.

142. Ibid.
Hirsch acknowledges that his revised account is a “new and different theory” because of the conceptual difference between his earlier and later views. In his early works, meaning was restricted to what the author meant “or could have entertained at the time of composition”; it was about consciousness and limited to what was implicitly contained in the intentional object of the original author: “the boundaries of that historical object were the boundaries that enabled meaning to keep its self-identity.”¹⁴⁴ But in his revision of 1984 he incorporates new, unthought-of exemplifications within what he calls the “self-identical meaning.” Of his revisions, he says that his emphasis on “the provisionality of speech and on the delicate ad hoc judgments entailed by the provisionality of language have brought the theory closer to the complex truth about what responsible speakers and interpreters actually do, and should continue to do.”¹⁴⁵ But, I suggest, in the light of the description of the nature of interpretation and interpreters in the following chapters, Hirsch does not go far enough in his analysis of what “interpreters actually do” or, more importantly, are. After an elaboration of HUFPaT in the following chapters, I will return to Hirsch and show why even his later concession to provisionality and the plausibility of his opening up the space of meaning to a trajectory stemming from a fixed authorial intention, is unconvincing. A Heideggerian/Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics undermines Hirsch’s only-slightly-modified schema based as it is on the dual fixity of both the human subject and the meaning as an object to be interpreted.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined two well-known, representative, but thoroughly divergent challenges to a view of human knowing such as HUFPaT, which offers both robust truth but also recognises the implications for knowing of an ontological hermeneutics. The recognition of genuine finitude rather than just epistemological limitations can be seen to lead, with Rorty, into a view that truth is a cultural phenomenon, made rather than discovered—what our peers will let us get away with

¹⁴⁵. Ibid.
saying—and there is little sense in discussing further either the nature or content of truth. For him, the task in hand is the cultural one of casting culture into the mould that ‘we’ (Rorty’s liberal ironists perhaps—as long as they have the global hegemony to do so) would like it to be. On the other hand, resisting the validity of a fundamentally hermeneutic description of human being and its implications, Hirsch holds firmly to a dualist subject-object dichotomy incorporating his fixed human subject and his unique but open authorial meaning.

Having considered these very different positions of Rorty and Hirsch I now turn to an outline of a via media that consists in a hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional approach to truth. I claim that it is a view that offers robust truth, in contrast to Rorty’s behaviourist epistemology, and also in the face of Hirsch’s fears about radical relativism. In the next chapter I will sketch the characteristics of an understanding of human knowledge that both accepts what is valid in the polarity of views represented by Hirsch and Rorty, but also answers the respective challenges to robust truth and knowledge that is inherent in their views. I will then turn, in chapter 4, to the work of Michael Polanyi who outlines a view of knowing in the natural sciences that is consonant with HUFPaT. In the following chapter I consider the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans Georg Gadamer before returning in the final chapter to clarifying and responding to the key problem raised by an ‘epistemology’ such as HUFPaT—that of whether it falls into a form of relativism that rules out the possibility of making robust truth claims.
Chapter 3

Heideggerian background for a hermeneutic approach to truth

In this chapter I first sketch a view of human knowing that I have called a hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional approach to truth (HUFPaT), and then I turn to its ontological foundations in the work of Heidegger. In later chapters I will deal more directly with epistemological issues in the natural and the human sciences. My contention is that HUFPaT is a valid description of actual knowing practices and their conditions of possibility, and that HUFPaT is able to maintain a claim to robust truth and knowing while at the same time recognising both the ontological and epistemological implications of a hermeneutics informed especially by Heidegger and taken up by Gadamer. I will also show in chapter 4 that Polanyi’s understanding of knowing, outlined in his Personal Knowledge¹ and based on his career as a leading physical chemist, can be redescribed as HUFPaT. And in a concluding chapter I will respond obliquely to both Rorty and Hirsch showing that HUFPaT offers answers to the questions raised by their views, and hence that it offers a way to robust truth, which neither falls into radical indeterminacy (as Rorty does) nor fails to accept the profound degree to which human actors are culturally, historically, and linguistically constituted (as Hirsch does).

While the use of these descriptive terms—HUFP—is dictated by an attempt to clarify the chief characteristics of what I claim to be a true description of truth, knowing, and understanding, its defining feature is that this is a description based on the conviction that all human life and practice is intrinsically hermeneutic, in the sense the word is used in the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics. Arising from this understanding of hermeneutics are various entailments three of which are captured by universal, fiduciary, and provisional. In this chapter I elucidate each of these terms before moving on to describe and adopt aspects of Heidegger’s view of truth and understanding. I also include a discussion of the medial nature of truth, something

¹. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge.
hinted at in Heidegger’s work and more obvious in Gadamer and Polanyi, although, apart from a brief reference by Gadamer to the mediality of play, they do not use that term. While there is no M for mediality in ‘HUFPaT’, we will see that essential to the Heideggerian and Gadamerian understanding of ‘hermeneutics’ is the event of disclosure of truth that occurs in a medial space between the so-called subjects and objects of knowledge.

By describing HUFPaT as an approach to truth and knowing I am deliberately drawing on two senses of the word ‘approach’, one more active than the other. In the active sense, an approach is the means of arriving at something—“one approach to the city is from the west by train”—so, as an approach to truth, HUFPaT is concerned with the manner of arriving at robust truth. This sense is one that falls within the ambit of epistemology as it tackles the question of understanding how we arrive at robust truth claims. My answer, to be teased out through looking at Gadamer and Polanyi, is that we do so ‘hermeneutically’ in all cases, and that the truth claims we arrive at are universal (in a Polanyian sense), fiduciary, and provisional. The less active sense of ‘approach’ is about a way of thinking about something—“one approach to therapy is Freudian”—so this amounts to a perspective or a viewpoint, but one that claims to be more accurate than others. In this sense HUFPaT is a particular view about the nature of truth and understanding, to be expounded in this chapter; it is about the universal (in a Gadamerian sense) ontological foundations of human knowing and understanding.

As will become clear, and is exhibited in the paragraphs above, HUFPaT is an approach (in the second sense) that blurs the distinction between knowing on the one hand and understanding on the other—the first traditionally associated with science and especially the natural sciences, the second associated with interpretive disciplines such as history, literature, and even art. If, as I argue, the natural sciences too are characterised by all the same hermeneutic aspects—both at the epistemic and ontological levels—as other disciplines, and if our understanding both of science and other disciplines needs to be reassessed after the Heideggerian ‘ontological turn’, then

there is no justification for drawing a sharp distinction between knowing and understanding. While the division may remain helpful in pointing to the different ‘objects’ of understanding and knowing respectively, even that use is moot following Kant’s, Heidegger’s, and others’ problematising of the idea of any object that is not always and already shaped by the ‘subject’ that knows or understands. That sort of, now philosophically out-of-date, idea of objectivity is no longer viable as we recognise the finitude of the human cognitive condition and as we take seriously the ontological implications of the fact that we always find ourselves already in a world of which we are a part and which contributes to constituting who we are.

In laying out HUFPaT for the reader’s consideration, my elaboration is also a case in point: it makes a robust truth claim—that this is the nature of human understanding and truth—and, in Heideggerian terms, it does so by attempting to lead the reader into the ‘open space’ or medial space where the truth of that claim is unveiled or unconcealed in an event of disclosure. So, in saying that it is a robust truth claim, I mean two things: both that it is true for all people, and that it is justified—that there are good reasons to believe it. In Polanyian terms, my claims about truth are made with ‘universal intent’, hoping that the reader too will see things as I do and become equally convinced. In Gadamerian terms, I initiate a dialogue or conversation aimed at promoting a fusion of horizons out of which the truth arises. So, for example, I will elaborate at length my understanding of some aspects of Heidegger’s thinking, but I cannot force the reader to see things as I do. There is no pretence that there is an overwhelming argument, perhaps appealing to the power of rigorous logic, which will force assent; this description is offered as a universal yet provisional claim, which I believe that others have good reason to accept as true.

3.1 HUFPaT: A universal, fiduciary, provisional approach to truth

I turn now to an introduction to the four predicates of HUFPaT, all of which will be expanded in the discussion of truth, knowledge, and the so-called knowing subject, in subsequent sections and chapters—firstly, in this chapter, by drawing on Heidegger to elucidate the ontological aspects of human knowing, and then, in following chapters,
by turning to Gadamer and Polanyi to see how HUFPaT fits their descriptions of the way knowing works in practice. In the case of Polanyi, this description originates in the natural sciences but is more generally applicable, and, for Gadamer, the description is of knowing or understanding in the traditionally ‘interpretive’ jurisdictions.

It should be noted that all four characteristics of my view are interdependent and ultimately not separable, so, as we have already seen, any discussion of one will elucidate and depend on aspects of the others. There are also other concomitant features that could have been chosen to contribute to an already unwieldy acronym. Robust, for example, is an essential consequence of the description I offer; Polanyi’s tacit dimension of knowing, which correlates with the pre-articulated understanding in Heidegger and with Gadamer’s consideration of prejudice, is also captured by ‘hermeneutic’, as are the medial and event-like characteristics of truth that are in stark contrast to the erroneous, static view of knowledge when it is understood as a store of cognitive objects rather than as a dynamic ability to get about in, and make sense of, the temporal situation in which we find ourselves. (As noted in the introductory chapter, it is this event-like character of truth that leads me often to speak of knowing rather than using the static knowledge.) Therefore, while it is worth bringing some characteristics into the spotlight of an acronym, they are perspectives, and not the only possible ones, on the single phenomenon of human knowing, which, the way I tell the story, includes all of them as necessary features. So, to speak of knowing as a hermeneutic process is necessarily to speak of universality, provisionality, and of the fiduciary nature of the way knowing occurs, but it is also to speak of robustness, mediality and of the event of truth. In the light of this, the reader will need to forgive a degree of repetition, or, better, hermeneutic circularity, in what follows.

To say that all human life and practice is hermeneutic is to make ontological claims with epistemological implications: not only can our thought processes be described as interpretive but the very nature of human beings is rooted in their meaning-making co-constitution with their ‘world’ of which they are inescapably a part. This is one aspect of the universality of hermeneutics; human beings are by nature interpreting beings. And yet even in that description a conceptual wedge is driven between the
world and beings, which, according to this view, do not exist as themselves apart from that world. Therefore, hermeneutics, as used in this thesis, refers not only to an epistemological claim about the means of coming to knowledge but also to the foundational conditions for the possibility of knowledge, including those arising from the nature of human beings who are ontologically constituted as understanding beings. So, to dispel the possibility of ambiguity, ‘hermeneutics’ is not used here (as it commonly is in non-philosophical literature) as simply a synonym for deliberate interpretation; it is used as shorthand for philosophical hermeneutics, which both concerns the theory of understanding and interpretation, and also incorporates the ontological dimensions of the question of understanding as especially highlighted by Heidegger and taken up by Gadamer and others.

There are three senses in which HUFPaT points to the universal nature of hermeneutics: they are what I will call the epistemic, the epistemological, and the ontological senses. The first points to the universality of truth, one of the pair of characteristics required for what I describe as robustness, while the other two senses arise from the universality inherent in the conditions for the possibility of knowledge; the first of these points to the ubiquity of the hermeneutic network of interpretation and the second to the ontological grounding of philosophical hermeneutics that makes it universal in the sense that it is a description of a universally shared ontology. So for example, Jeff Malpas refers to the ontological and epistemological aspects respectively when he says that Gadamer elaborates “a philosophical hermeneutics that provides an account of the nature of understanding in its universality (where this refers both to the ontologically fundamental character of the hermeneutical situation and the all-encompassing nature of hermeneutic practice).” I turn now to a brief outline of these three senses.

The epistemic feature of HUFPaT’s universality is that it is a claim about universal truth. This sense of universality is set in contrast to what might loosely and for the moment, be called relativism (to which I will return in the final chapter), and hence

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it challenges the views of both Rorty and Hirsch. Robust truth, as I am calling it, is universal—“true for all,” we might say, or “true irrespective of what an individual or group or culture thinks about the matter,” or, again with caveats in place, universal truth might be described by some as a synonym for absolute truth—although the term ‘absolute’ introduces unhelpful connotations of an imaginary ‘unworlded’ knower and would be inconsistent with the provisionality of HUFPaT that arises from universal ontological conditions and not merely epistemological difficulties. So, in a description borrowed from Polanyi and to be elaborated later, despite the subjective element inherent in all truth claims, they are made with universal intent.

While I describe HUFPaT as an accurate account of human knowing practices that can validly make robust truth claims, that should not be understood as a contention about a human ability to ascertain what is true and to offer undeniable reasons for its claims. So Polanyi’s ‘universal intent’ describes the scope but not the strength of the claim: while something is claimed to be universally true the claim is nevertheless a provisional one. In other words, such claims are about how things are, independent of my thinking about how things are, and their truth, although not the language or concepts in which the claims are couched, is (apart from self-referential cases) independent of the knower who asserts that such claims are true. So, for example, while ‘snow is white’ is a proposition embedded in language and concepts it nevertheless points to a truth that is extra-linguistic and extra-conceptual. When we turn to examine the work of Polanyi I will discuss the questions arising from making universal truth claims while at the same time disclaiming the possibility of offering universally persuasive reasons for accepting those claims.

Given this understanding of the link between knowing and truth, HUFPaT also entails immunity from the criticism that, on the basis of it not providing overwhelming reasons for assenting to knowledge claims, its view of knowledge is relativist. That is, offering as it does, a description of the limitations of any justification that a claim is true, HUFPaT is not susceptible to the criticism that its position cannot be proven. This is so because HUFPaT itself makes a claim about justification that includes the thesis that justification is not about offering proof. I will return to this argument, particularly
in the final chapter when defending HUFPaT against the possibility of a debilitating form of relativism, it suffices to say here that if HUFPaT is a correct description of human knowing then it is no criticism of it that it cannot offer overwhelming reasons that it is so. Like all knowledge this meta-claim presents itself for the judgment of others who are challenged to commit the fiduciary act of affirmation, “yes, I believe it,” or to offer their reasons for their committed belief that “no, I don’t believe it is so.” In the Heideggerian language of disclosure, this thesis is offered as an assertion or pointer to how things are, which attempts to open the space of the disclosure of truth in the hope that the reflective reader will see too and say “yes, this is how things are with these matters.” In Gadamer’s language, this thesis is one side of a conversation that hopes to draw the reader in to experience truth emerging from the fusion of horizons that ensues. And in the language of Polanyi, this thesis is a personal claim, made with universal intent, which commits me to a position and is offered for the verdict of the ‘society of explorers’ who are experienced in such matters; they will make their fiduciary judgment and over time a consensus may evolve that “it is so” while all the while knowing “that it might conceivably be false.”

So, ultimately, the only proof that can be offered is in the sense that a metal is proven by fire: the HUFPaT thesis is tested by reflection and conversation and as it proves resistant or not, is ultimately judged to a lesser or greater degree to be confirmed and so is affirmed as correct.

Epistemologically, to assent to the broad picture that philosophical hermeneutics paints is to accept that knowing is not a linear process—for example, and most commonly, a procedure that starts with some sort of foundations and then, shoring up each step in a chain of reasoning, arrives at a knowledge claim. Rather, knowing is an iterative art of discerning meaningful connections—a process where there is interdependence between the parts and the whole of a meaningful structure. This ubiquitous circle of understanding has been recognised in the area of textual interpretation, particularly biblical interpretation, at least as far back as Spinoza’s

Theology and Politics of 1670, and formalised in the early nineteenth century by Schleiermacher who said: “Complete knowledge always involves an apparent circle, that each part can be understood only out of the whole to which it belongs, and vice versa. All knowledge which is scientific must be constructed in this way.” Again with respect to textual interpretation, Schleiermacher saw this circle at work in both objective and subjective ways, the first dealing with the parts and the whole of a text, the second highlighting the relationship between text and author. “In interpretation,” he says, “it is essential that one be able to step out of one’s frame of mind into that of the author,” because, for Schleiermacher, “one must have an understanding of man himself in order to understand what he speaks, and yet one comes to know what man is from his speech.” Gadamer puts it this way: “Our task is to expand the unity of the understood meaning centrifugally. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.” And it is Gadamer, more than anyone, who is responsible for showing that if all truth arises by means of a hermeneutic circle or spiral then hermeneutics is a description of human understanding and cognitive engagement that is universal rather than being limited to a field or aspect of life such as textual interpretation or ‘the humanities’ or quotidian life in its untheorised normality. For this reason, the universality of HUFPaT extends even to the natural sciences, traditionally seen as distinctive in their objectivity and disengaged explanation of the natural world ‘as it really is’.

Ontologically, philosophical hermeneutics reveals the universality of our ‘Being-in-the-world’—to use the terminology of Heidegger who instituted the

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'ontological turn’ in hermeneutics with his *Being and Time*. The bulk of this chapter is dedicated to elaborating some aspects of his thinking but, in short, its significance is that an adequate description of human beings and the human situation (for that matter anything that can be described as a *situation*) must be a hermeneutic one; we are hermeneutically constituted and not contingently hermeneutic. So, in claiming universality at the ontological level, HUFPaT goes beyond a mere description of the methods or maxims of understanding; it makes claims about what it means to be human and asserts that intrinsic to being human is that we are a being for whom understanding, in Heidegger’s very particular, ‘existential’ or ‘ontological’ sense, is part of its own essence. While this description, just given, minimises Heideggerian language, the conceptual link is clear, so it is to Heidegger that I will turn to outline the universal ontology implicit in using ‘hermeneutics’ in the sense arising from the Heideggerian tradition. And while neither Heidegger nor Gadamer speaks much of natural science, I will extend their universal hermeneutics to incorporate more explicitly the scientific enterprise.

The *fiduciary* aspect of HUFPaT, which arises partly from the *provisionality* that I will turn to in the next paragraph, is an entailment of the apparently banal but fecund recognition that all knowing, when stated explicitly, results in human truth claims or beliefs for which I am to some degree accountable. There is no sincere statement of claimed knowledge that cannot be prefaced with “it is my belief that …” and in that statement also hides the “I am (more or less) *responsibly committed* to the belief that …” As we will see, this is what Polanyi points to in arguing for “the fiduciary basis of all knowing”;10 knowledge claims involve trusting and trustworthy commitment that often remains unexpressed but which is inherent in the logic of making a claim. This aspect of knowledge claims—of explicitly pointing to the personal responsibility involved in making any claim or in accepting a claim made by another—is the universal *fiduciary* element of HUFPaT; there are no knowledge claims that are not personal

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claims and those claims are held with varying degrees of conviction and varying degrees of reflexivity by those who claim to know. Strictly speaking, if objectivity is understood to exclude subjectivity, there are no ‘objective’ claims and there is no objective knowledge. Only subjects—only knowers—can know and can stake claims, and so the first-person language of conviction, of belief, of responsible judgment, is more transparent than a language that obscures the fiduciary aspects of any knowledge claim by depersonalising it. This fiduciary aspect of knowing will be more fully elaborated in the next chapter as Polanyi points especially to the fiduciary nature of the natural sciences.

I turn now to the last of the four predicates of HUFPaT, which we have already touched on in the discussion of Hirsch’s position. To describe a claim as provisional explicitly recognises that despite its being made with Polanyi’s universal intent, there is no guarantee either that agreement will be reached or that I, or we, are right. Being aware of the conditioning of history, culture, language, and of reason itself, as well as the inability to offer anything that resembles proof, means I concede that my knowledge claims are provisional; they may be wrong. As I have already mentioned, the Cartesian dream of finding a high road to sure knowledge has only run into dead-ends, made evident at both the epistemic and ontological levels. Epistemically, there are no indubitable foundations upon which to build deductive edifices; this much is by now almost incontrovertible. But more fundamentally, the Cartesian dream that depends on the objective, disengaged human subject standing in some sense apart from the object known assumes, according to a hermeneutic understanding, a false and confused ontology. While the epistemic difficulties of the modern Cartesian quest have significantly contributed to what some have called postmodernism and a resultant epistemic indolence that equates provisionality with relativism or agnosticism, a hermeneutic ontology reveals that there should be a circumspection involved in making what are provisional assertions. This caution is rooted in the recognition of a finitude more profound than can be overcome by simply honing our methods and increasing the number of significant figures of our claims. Finitude (and the provisionality entailed) is not a contingent imperfection to be overcome or resisted like an invading organism, but
is rather more like an organ, which contributes to the whole body—a part of our constitution and a part such that the attempt to excise it is an attempt to deny our identity as fallible, finite beings, always and rightly looking through a glass dimly as we always find ourselves in a particular and situated existence. In a word, we are not God.

However, provisionality is not a synonym for a form of fideism, which carries overtones of either believing for no good reason or of there being no reasons to choose between one belief and another. To hold a belief provisionally can be to have a justified belief but at the same time recognise that it might conceivably be a wrong belief. I will return to the nature of reasons in the last chapter.

3.2 Heidegger’s ‘subject’ Dasein and its ‘world’

I turn now to draw on Heidegger’s exposition—found particularly in Being and Time and “On the Essence of Truth”—of Being-in-the-world, truth, and understanding. It is an exposition that is often convoluted, but which points to realities of the human ontological condition that are ignored at the peril of epistemology. There are four parts in the following lengthy discussion, starting with an outline of the essential background to Heidegger’s approach to understanding and truth, which is found in his elucidation of his human ‘subject’, ‘Dasein’, and its ‘world’. This background is one aspect—the ontological one—of HUFPaT’s hermeneutic dimension and it also contributes to the provisional nature of truth claims because it reveals the in-principle impossibility of the disengaged observer—a condition for indubitable knowledge.

In the second section to follow, on truth (section 3.3), I outline Heidegger’s understanding of truth as unconcealment because it provides a convincing description of the essential ontological background to the various views of truth as correctness that I follow Heidegger in qualifying. It is Heidegger’s account of the shortcomings of such views that forms the basis for my claim that all knowing, including that of science, is rooted in the same sort of tacit knowing that lies at the heart of Heidegger’s description of the unconcealment or uncovering of truth.

In the following section (3.4) I move away from dealing with Heidegger directly as I elaborate on latent clues in his description (that also appear in Polanyi and
Gadamer) that lead me to emphasise the medial nature of truth and knowing. This understanding of the essential mediality of knowing contributes to describing it as hermeneutic (in the epistemological and ontological senses described above) as well as to describing it as fiduciary, although the latter ramification will be less apparent until I outline Polanyi’s view, which makes clear how the personal agency involved in the medial discovery of truth has fiduciary entailments.

In the light of the views developed in the first three sections, of the condition of the human ‘subject’ and the nature of truth, in the following section (3.5) I draw again on Heidegger to outline what I describe as a knowing dynamic, moving from pre-cognised ontological understanding through interpretation to assertions and propositions that make explicit claims to be correct. As we will see, this is akin to Gadamer’s “one unified [hermeneutical] process” that incorporates understanding, interpretation, and application, and which, for him, finds its essential expression in speech.¹¹ It is this knowing dynamic, in which the epistemic is seamlessly integrated into the ontological, that forms the basis of my thesis that all knowing/understanding can be described as a hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional approach to truth.

Why Heidegger?

While Gadamer and Polanyi focus on the crisis of method revealed by their respective visions of the problems of traditional epistemology, it is Heidegger who does the ontological work that reveals the lie of the land in which the views of Gadamer and Polanyi are rooted. For Gadamer, this Heideggerian ontological inheritance is deep and explicit, while for Polanyi it is not so much an inheritance as an accidental, although not contingent, connection arising out of the entailments of his epistemology.

Heidegger’s writing is notoriously obscure. But in his obscurity he breaks the bounds of traditional manners of thinking and reveals other ways of comprehending what he calls our ‘Being-in-the-world’ that make sense but cannot be fully explicated. Heidegger tries to expose the nature of the human-world relationship in a way that does

not reinforce inherited errors, and as he does so he reveals or lays bare the space in which human understanding works, while at the same time knowing that to do so in words is fraught with all the problems that make the enterprise necessary and which mean that it will inevitably be a hermeneutic one as he uses language in novel ways to break the hold of preconceptions and to draw the interpreter into a new way of seeing—a way that he claims discloses more adequately how things are with human ‘Being-in-the-world’.

For these reasons I will draw extensively on Heidegger outlining those aspects of his thinking that contribute to HUFPaT. I will follow Heidegger as he searches, not for precise words, without remainder, that will identify the objects of his interest (such as understanding, knowledge, truth), but for ways of allowing the truth about Being to reveal itself as he talks around the issues and re-envisions the discussion so that we too might experience the uncovering of truth about the nature of human understanding, as well as the frustration—because we would like things to be clearer—of not being able to precisely elaborate the subject. So, through Heidegger, and later Gadamer, I will explore ways of describing the conditions and the encounter out of which truth emerges. And, in expanding on Polanyi’s view of natural science, I will make it clear how the latter’s description fits with a hermeneutic approach to understanding and knowledge claims. In the light of such a synthesis between hermeneutics and science it will be clear that there is no hope of fulfilling the epistemological pretensions of the Enlightenment, even in natural science; there is no certainty, no truth that is complete or proven, no world that can be identified as it is in itself that is separable from our pointers to it and from the always-engaged knower, and there is no method that guarantees truth. Instead, we are left with a hermeneutic approach to truth as the unconcealed, and always only partially, which results, first, in tacit understanding (or knowing—the distinction between the two becomes moot) and then later, sometimes, in explicit claims about how things are, which are made provisionally and with universal intent. Such are the implications of Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world to which I now turn.
Heidegger’s project is crucial for the subject of this thesis not only because, as a “phenomenology of human understanding”\textsuperscript{12} (Carman’s phrase), it lies behind the work of his student Gadamer, but also because Heidegger’s is the defining move that highlights the problems of ways of thinking that are locked into Enlightenment aspirations concerning the possibility of explicitly articulating the landscape of ontology and epistemology, and of doing so in terms of a knowing subject disconnected from the object of knowledge. To take Heidegger seriously means either to resign oneself to another means of access to, and understanding of, truth, or to give up the quest for confident belief and robust truth. Rorty is a prominent example of one who, in my terms, has given up the quest; he recognises the profound difficulties with the received, post-Enlightenment view, which posits an objective human subject who looks with what Putnam calls a “God’s-Eye View”\textsuperscript{13} upon the world. But Rorty’s solution is to leave the quest behind altogether and turn to public discourse in order to exercise rhetorical influence in the interests of a ‘better world’, without basing such rhetoric on appeals to truth. Heidegger, however, along with Gadamer and Polanyi, holds on to robust truth but in a different sense—a sense that does not carry with it the problems that Rorty, for example, finds insurmountable in traditional epistemology and ontology. However, Heidegger’s major project is not so much with the finding of specific truth or truths; he is more concerned with the ontological and general question of the nature of truth and how it is discovered at all. His philosophy is fundamental and phenomenological, exploring the everyday, unexamined knowing and understanding that lies behind all conscious ways of knowing the world, including those of science; for Heidegger, all ways of knowing are built on his primordial Being-in-the-world.

As alluded to above, Heidegger’s reshaping of ontology and hence of epistemology has ramifications for the way we understand the natural sciences; they too rest on ontological assumptions including, usually, a view of the scientific enterprise that juxtaposes the real world as an object that is observed, with the scientist as the disengaged observer-subject. More than that though, the sciences are in fact founded on

\textsuperscript{12} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, xvi.

\textsuperscript{13} Putnam and Conant (ed.), \textit{Realism with a Human Face}, 5.
the phenomenological realities that Heidegger describes, hence, to repeat myself, natural science is a hermeneutic exercise. While we will see in the next chapter that Polanyi’s very brief reference to Heidegger overdraws the similarity between his own views and Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world, there is nevertheless a significant overlap and a fruitful comparison can be made.

I turn now to a description of facets of Heidegger’s undertaking in which I will focus on those aspects of his thinking—particularly in his earlier work—that contribute to my project. I don’t pretend to offer a comprehensive or balanced view of Heidegger and in later parts of this thesis I will draw on his ideas without attribution; although I accept much of his thinking, my purpose is not to either justify or repudiate Heidegger so much as to draw on his description of human Being-in-the-world for what it contributes to HUFPaT.

Heidegger’s project, which sets the agenda for Gadamer (and indeed for much of twentieth-century Continental philosophy) is descriptive not normative; it is an attempt to map how the land lies with respect to living and working and all sorts of functioning in the everyday world in which human beings find themselves. So, it is a “descriptive phenomenology”\(^\text{14}\) that attempts to allow what Heidegger calls ‘entities’ (das Seiende)\(^\text{15}\) to be as they are and to reveal themselves as they are, rather than to press them into the forms necessary for scientific measurement or an analysis that insists on preconceived categories of thought or systematisation. Hence, he aims “to grasp its objects in such a way that everything about them which is up for discussion must be treated by exhibiting it directly and demonstrating it directly.”\(^\text{16}\) So, in this sense, ‘description’ is not a procedure but rather a way of avoiding procedures that would cover up this direct demonstration or, better, encounter.

While it is Heidegger’s description of truth and understanding that I will largely adopt as my own and will explicate at some length below, it is to the Heideggerian subject, Dasein, that I turn first. This is necessary because the profound nature of

\(^\text{14}\) Heidegger, Being and Time, 59.

\(^\text{15}\) Heidegger uses ‘entities’ rather than ‘things’ because to talk of ‘things’ already imports ontological assumptions. See ibid., 96.

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 59.
Heidegger’s undertaking in his ground-breaking *Being and Time* lies in his description of the ineliminable connection between Dasein and the world of Dasein’s understanding in which truth is disclosed. There can be no discussion of understanding or truth in Heideggerian terms that does not also involve Dasein.

*Dasein and its ‘world’*

Dasein—which is his Heidegger’s way of describing the existing human subject—is always found making sense of itself, or *understanding* itself, in relation to its world. This Dasein is defined by two principal features: first, it is the entity whose essence lies in its being, or in its *existence*, in the special Heideggerian ontological sense of ‘existence’ (*Existenz*) which is reserved for “that kind of Being towards which Dasein can comport itself … and always does.” This constitutive feature of Dasein is ‘pre-ontological’ as it comes before any formal consideration or discussion of ontology, with the corollary that Heidegger’s ‘existence’ should not be confused with his ‘existentialia’, which describes the ‘presence-at-hand’ or abstracted notion of entities other than Dasein. So the essence of Dasein lies not in what it ‘is’ in a static sense (*existentia*) as a ‘thing’ that can be thought of as merely persisting through the stream of time, but in its dynamic possibilities arising from its temporal *existence*.

Central to existence is Dasein’s concern for its own being; its understanding of itself through its multiple *possibilities*, including its understanding of the possibility of its being authentically itself by taking hold of possibilities—what Heidegger calls projection, to which I will return—or of falling into inauthenticity by “neglecting” to do so and not ‘being itself’. But this ‘understanding’ (*Verstehen*) is, in the first place, existential rather than cognitive: it is about Dasein’s constitutive way of being rather

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17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 32.
19. Heidegger introduces the ‘present-at-hand’ on page 48 of *Being and Time* and later at page 67 clarifies the distinction between Dasein and the present-at-hand. Distinguishing between the different sorts of existence, he says: “We shall always use the Interpretive expression ‘presence-at-hand’ for the term ‘existentia’, while the term ‘existence’, as a designation of Being, will be allotted solely to Dasein. The ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence.” Ibid., 67.
20. Ibid., 185.
21. Ibid., 33.
than something that Dasein does. As indicated above, Dasein is also reflexive: the analysis of Dasein is an analysis of ourselves, and, more, the being that we call ‘ourselves’ is constituted by our own sense-making existence. So, says Heidegger, “Dasein is an entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly towards that Being.” Blattner summarises: “Dasein is the entity whose being is always at issue in what it does, that is, the entity who always has an understanding of itself, and whose self-understanding is constitutive of its ‘being-so,’ its being what or who it is.” Blattner formulates this in what he calls “the existentiality thesis” which holds: “If Dasein is A, then it is A because it understands itself as A.” But, it should be noted (and as we will see later in this chapter), this existentiality thesis is not about cognitive understanding; the thesis is only comprehended correctly in the context of Heidegger’s use of ‘understanding’ in his own precognitive sense rather than that of common usage. Following Heidegger, Blattner speaks of understanding as capability or know-how and not as cognition or even awareness, the latter pair being derivative of Heidegger’s existential phenomenon of understanding. But this inherent reflexivity of Dasein does not mean that it is a ‘subject’ that can be isolated from an ‘objective’ world: rather, Dasein participates in a fundamental structure described by Heidegger as ‘Being-in-the-world’, a phrase that attempts to capture a “unitary phenomenon” that overcomes false dichotomies such as subject-object, consciousness-world, and inside-outside. This is a view of the ‘subject’ that challenges the basis of Enlightenment epistemology and the supposed objectivity of science. Heidegger sums up the distinctive nature of Dasein, which finds itself not just always and already in a world but co-constituted with its world, in this way:

Dasein is an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it. But in that case, this is a constitutive state of Dasein’s Being, and this implies that Dasein, in its

22. Ibid., 78.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 33.
Being, has a relationship towards that Being—a relationship which itself is one of
Being. And this means further that there is some way in which Dasein understands itself
in its Being, and that to some degree it does so explicitly. It is peculiar to this entity that
with and through its Being, this Being is disclosed to it. Understanding of Being is itself
a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being.\(^{27}\)

In order to analyse the reality that underlies and is covered up by conditioned
appearances and experience, Heidegger adopts his own distinctive phenomenological
approach to Dasein, its ‘world’, and ‘the question of Being’. His is an attempt to go
behind appearances to the transcendental conditions of all articulated understanding and
its subject matter. In this, he is following his one time teacher and friend Husserl to
whom Being and Time is dedicated, but he breaks from Husserl, the ‘father of
phenomenology’, by rejecting any suggestion that it is possible to maintain a
transcendental ego which, once disengaged from Husserl’s ‘lifeworld’ through the
latter’s ‘phenomenological reduction’, can then observe the actions of consciousness
objectively. For Heidegger, the task of his novel phenomenology of Dasein is a two-
stage process. While the aim is to uncover “what goes to make up Being,”\(^{28}\) Being is
always the Being of entities, so the challenge is to “bring forward the entities
themselves if it is our aim that Being should be laid bare.”\(^{29}\) However, he warns, Being
is not an entity in itself but rather pertains to every entity, having a universality that
arises from the fact that “Being and the structure of Being lie beyond every entity and
every possible character which an entity may possess.”\(^{30}\)

For Heidegger, while phenomenology must be descriptive, this does not mean it
is based on the erroneous subject-object dichotomy that aims at a pure description of an
unworlded consciousness. Rather, and in contrast to Husserl’s perspective of the
transcendental ego, it must involve itself in an interpretive wrestle with the world of
which Dasein is always a part, notwithstanding the illusion that it can stand outside that
world. It is central to the hermeneutic universality of HUFPaT that despite positivist
claims about the objectivity of the disengaged human observer (and hence the putative

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 32.
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 61.
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
\(^{30}\) Ibid., 62.
distinction between the natural and human sciences) there is no world that is not already inhabited by the human subject (Heidegger’s Dasein) and there is no subject that is not already in a world—that does not already and only exist as Being-in-the-world. So, in Carman’s words contrasting Heidegger with Husserl’s hope of phenomenological insight into pure being that is un tarnished by subjectivity, “phenomenology must instead be ‘hermeneutical,’ or interpretive. Like the illuminating construal of a text, that is, hermeneutical phenomenology offers insight not just by exhibiting what is already self-evident in awareness, but by drawing out, eliciting, evoking, uncovering what lies hidden or buried in and around whatever manifests itself openly in the world.”  

So, Heidegger’s is an attempt to come to grips with the subject as it finds itself: Dasein is always already in the world even while attempting to rid itself of presuppositions about the ontological make up of that world. This is a view that has radical implications for the nature of human knowing and it especially challenges received understandings of scientific knowledge.

Thus Heidegger’s project is inherently an interpretive exploration: it is a hermeneutic. In fact, he claims, it is a triply hermeneutic pursuit: firstly, in what he calls a primordial sense of a hermeneutic because interpretive discourse (as he understands logos, to be explained below) is Dasein’s way of engaging with its world. Heidegger says: “the λόγος of the phenomenology of Dasein has the character of a ἑρµηνεύειν, through which the authentic meaning of Being, and also those basic structures of Being which Dasein itself possesses, are made known to Dasein’s understanding of Being.”  

Simply put, Dasein is engaged in an interpretive or hermeneutic activity in its day-to-day existence as it projects its possibilities; it is involved in the “business of interpreting” and of understanding as it realises its possibilities, and, perhaps, as it brings this ‘tacit knowing’ to consciousness and even to explicit assertion—Dasein exists in the world hermeneutically. So, this first sense of hermeneutic refers to just the everyday business of being what Dasein is and doing what Dasein does: interpreting.

31. Ibid., xviii.
32. Ibid., 62.
33. Ibid.
But in doing so and in focussing on Being and revealing the way things are with Dasein’s relationship to Being, the project reveals, secondly, the way to interpret what is not Dasein, and, thirdly, the hermeneutic constitution of Dasein. The second sense in which the project is a hermeneutic arises from the primordial one as it realises the hermeneutic necessary to understanding any ontological investigation of entities that do not have the character of Dasein: this second-sense hermeneutic “[works] out the conditions on which the possibility of any ontological investigation depends.”34 In this sense, Heidegger’s project “exhibits the horizon for any further ontological study of those entities which do not have the character of Dasein.”35 In other words, as well as the first sense of arriving hermeneutically at understanding how things are, it arrives at the conclusion that understanding how things are is hermeneutic. Finally, the third, “philosophically primary,” sense in which the project is a hermeneutic is that it reveals the being of Dasein itself: “To the extent that Dasein, as an entity with the possibility of existence, has ontological priority over every other entity, ‘hermeneutic’, as an interpretation of Dasein’s Being, has the third and specific sense of an analytic of the existentiality of existence.”36 In summary, Dasein interprets, Dasein realises that all knowing is interpretive, and Dasein realises that Dasein itself is constituted interpretively.

So, Heidegger’s project is hermeneutic through and through. But how will he go about it without falling into past shortcomings? If traditional approaches are encumbered with problems, particularly of being held captive to a subject-object dichotomy, then, as we have seen, Heidegger’s way to an understanding of Being will be through his distinctive phenomenology where the focus or phenomenon to be investigated is “that which shows itself … the Being of entities, its meaning, its modifications and derivatives.”37 Here then, we have the distinction between Being and beings, so central to Heidegger’s project, where the first is the ontological grounding,

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34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 60. Heidegger’s italics.
which is ignored or covered over by discussion of beings and by adopting a subject-object dichotomy. A focus on beings that ignores Being assumes that all that can ‘exist’ is able to be encompassed by ‘entities’. In its attempt to know the world, philosophy covers up Being itself; it has squeezed the world into its own mould but in doing so has distorted our understanding of reality. So, according to Heidegger, his phenomenology is the only way of access to ontology because it offers the only means of avoiding thinking of the world as so many entities understood and dealt with in the ways that the history of Western philosophy has dictated.\(^{38}\) For this reason I will briefly follow Heidegger’s description of phenomenology as he understands it. As I do so we will see that his elucidation touches on aspects of what I have called a dynamic of knowing, which ranges from pre-conscious, Heideggerian understanding, through discourse and interpretation, to explicit assertion. For both Heidegger and, as we will see, Polanyi, any explicit knowledge or understanding is founded on pre-cognitive or tacit knowing, and, along with Gadamer, both describe the process of arriving at truth as one bound up with unarticulated and event-like dis-covering that gives a quasi-agency to that which is known.

Crucial to understanding Heidegger’s project, and important for supporting the claim of HUFPaT that there is no possibility of a disengaged human knower, is his undoing of the way we traditionally understand our engagement with the ‘world’ and the ways of approaching the objects of everyday experience. One distinction he makes is between the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand. The first and normal way of dealing with things is the unarticulated ‘ready-to-hand’ use of things. Mostly we treat and understand the entities around us as ready-to-hand and other ways of understanding derive from this immediate and normal apprehension. To use an example we will come across in Polanyi, the surgeon uses the scalpel in a skilled, transparent way such that it ‘disappears’ as we ‘look through’ the instrument to the job in hand. So the scalpel is encountered as a scalpel by being used or available for possible use in this way; it simply stands ready for use. This is true of all our skilful but untheorised coping or

dealing with the world, a “concernful absorption in whatever work-world lies closest to us,”39 and is typified in using equipment like scalpels or riding bicycles or Heidegger’s famous hammer.40 But Heidegger’s use of the term ‘equipment’ does not allow us to extricate the scalpel or the hammer from the world in which they find their meanings as scalpel and hammer. ‘Hammer’ is meaningless in a world without nails and the practices of carpentry. So, strictly speaking, “there ‘is’ no such thing as an equipment,”41 says Heidegger, highlighting the error of thinking that a scalpel, cut off from a world as an isolated object for examination, could be meaningful outside of its network of connections in Dasein’s world that includes surgeons and hospitals and medical hierarchies and health insurance and cancer and serving the sick and making a living … The meaningful connections that give the scalpel its meaning and that make it a *scalpel* go on interminably. It is this myriad of meaningful connections that make the world that the Dasein is always a part of and the world that makes Dasein what it is as an understanding, interpreting, projecting being.

When such equipment breaks or when we are not able to deal with it skilfully we may encounter it as ‘un-ready-to-hand’—as equipment that has broken down or that has gotten in the way and which forces us to focus not on the task at hand but on the equipment itself, leaving us disturbed that its ready-to-handedness is being frustrated.42 So the un-ready-to-hand draws attention to itself and obtrudes into our normal coping with the world, and it forces us to think in terms of Heidegger’s second category, the ‘present-at-hand,’ which he also calls ‘Reality’,43 pointing to the raw uninterpreted sense that “entities are, quite independently of the experience by which they are disclosed, the acquaintance in which they are discovered, and the grasping in which their nature is ascertained.”44 So the broken hammer is seen as failed equipment,

40. Ibid., 98.
41. Ibid., 97.
42. Ibid., 103.
43. Ibid., 245.
44. Ibid., 228.
“bringing to the fore the characteristic of presence-at-hand in what is ready-to-hand.”

Furthermore, the attempt to reduce the hammer to mere present-at-hand—to a piece of metal joined to a split piece of wood, for example—is ultimately impossible: even in this description the hammer-bits are re-placed in our world where ‘wood’ and ‘metal’ find their meanings. So, as we will see later in this chapter, the raw present-at-hand in an “‘unworlded’ world” totally divorced from a world of ready-to-hand equipment is incomprehensible, having been extricated from the web of connections that gives entities their meaningful place. This focus on the entity itself extricated from its normal place in the world of equipment and action is the theoretical object of analysis most obviously exemplified in the natural sciences. But, says Heidegger, it is a mistake to think that this reality of the present-at-hand and questions of the reality of the external world are not derivative on the normal everyday Being-in-the-world of Dasein: “Reality is not only one kind of Being among others, but ... ontologically it has a definite connection in its foundations with Dasein, the world, and readiness-to-hand.”

I have now outlined aspects of Heidegger’s novel description of Dasein and the ‘world’—Dasein’s world—in which it is constitutively embedded. It is a description that amounts to an ontological undoing of the subject-object dichotomy and which means that Dasein’s epistemic access to truth is universally hermeneutic in the Heideggerian and Gadamerian sense and so is always and essentially provisional. I turn now, first, to Heidegger’s view of truth as being primordially rooted in the medial space ‘between’ Dasein and its world, then I elaborate the idea of medially before turning to the stirrings of epistemology found in Heidegger as he describes the progressive dynamic of knowing from tacit to explicit knowing—a process ranging from his pre-cognitive understanding through interpretation to cognitive knowing and finally to assertion. While Heidegger’s is one language to describe this dynamic, and one that I suggest is over-theorised in its Teutonic tendency to order precisely that which is ultimately beyond words, the truth of his description is that knowing is always a

45. Ibid., 104.
47. Heidegger, Being and Time, 245.
dynamic, continuous process that starts in the event of the medial disclosure of truth
long before cognitive or assertoric elements finally try to fix, for myself and for others
to grasp more clearly, what is known. While this Heideggerian description approaches
epistemology from the ontological direction, we will see in the following chapter that
Polanyi’s ‘personal knowledge’ starts with epistemology and moves tentatively in the
reverse direction as it ventures into teasing out its own ontological entailments.
Gadamer for his part does not talk the language of epistemology but, as we will see in
chapter 5, he too founds his theory of understanding in the human sciences on a
Heideggerian ontology.

3.3 Truth as disclosure and correctness

Heidegger’s discussion of truth in Being and Time and “On the Essence of
Truth”\(^{48}\) is rooted in a discussion of the Greek etymology of both aletheia (ἀλήθεια) and
logos (λόγος) and while his argument raises a number of secondary issues, I will agree
with his substantive position that the nature of truth is inextricably tied to disclosure or
unconcealing. He also makes clear that while truth involves the correctness of assertions
this does not amount to a ‘correspondence theory of truth’ that compares putative
mental entities with others that are found in an ‘external world’. He says, for example:
“To say that an assertion ‘is true’ signifies that it uncovers the entity as it is in itself.
Such an assertion asserts, points out, ‘lets’ the entity ‘be seen’ (ἀπόφανσις) in its
uncoveredness. The Being-true (truth) of the assertion must be understood as Being-
uncovering. Thus truth has by no means the structure of an agreement between knowing
and the object in the sense of a likening of one entity (the subject) to another (the
Object).” While his discussion of the Greek understanding of aletheia as truth has been
questioned, most famously by Tugendhat,\(^{49}\) and not least by Heidegger himself, (his
repudiation appears in “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” written some

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Wachterhauser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994).
forty years after *Being and Time*\textsuperscript{50}) I claim that it is reasonable to adopt the view found in “On the Essence of Truth” and *Being and Time*. With the earlier Heidegger, I hold that the familiar idea of truth as correctness is essentially rooted in truth as disclosure.\textsuperscript{51}

There are two issues at stake in this discussion of Heidegger’s use of ‘truth’ and his late change of mind: one is both terminological and etymological, the other is substantive. I will comment on the former first before considering the substantive issue at length. The terminological/etymological issue revolves around whether it is appropriate to do as Heidegger does in most of his writing, which is to refer to the underlying conditions of possibility of ‘truth as correctness’, in disclosure or unconcealment, as *truth*, or whether that is a mistake. In his later view, Heidegger says that *aletheia* “grants the possibility of truth” but “is not yet truth” and that “to raise the question of *alētheia*, of unconcealment as such, is not the same as raising the question of truth” and that it was “misleading to call *alētheia*, in the sense of clearing, ‘truth.’” In fact, he says, “the natural concept of truth does not mean unconcealment, not in the philosophy of the Greeks either.”\textsuperscript{52} There are two senses in which Heidegger corrects his previous thinking; both are aspects of what I have called the terminological/etymological issue and both are captured in the words just quoted: the etymological question concerns the classical Greek understanding of *aletheia*, and the terminological question is about whether the concept of unconcealment or disclosure is rightly called truth. In this thesis I will bypass both the terminological and etymological questions and adopt Heidegger’s earlier position rather than following his late change of terminology, which, in any case, does not change the substantive issue at stake, which lies behind the discussion of etymology. This substantive issue is that of whether it is appropriate to incorporate the idea of *aletheia* as disclosure into the concept of truth. I claim that it is appropriate because the first ‘movement’ of truth is when reality is uncovered or disclosed—when it is revealed as true and understood to be true, long before it is cognised or theorised or asserted. So while I do not agree with Heidegger’s

\textsuperscript{50.} Particularly in Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” 446-447.
\textsuperscript{51.} Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 176-177.
\textsuperscript{52.} Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” 446-447.
late change of mind about using *aletheia*, I agree with his unchanged position that fundamental to any understanding of truth as correctness lies disclosure or unconcealment. In what follows I will outline this view including his using ‘truth’ for both correctness and disclosure (*aletheia*).

*Aletheia* is etymologically the privative of ‘concealment’, argues the Heidegger of the later 1920s, hence *logos* or discourse is true when it un conceals or discovers or uncovers something. In contrast, covering up or concealing is the essence of falsehood as it shows something as something else, which it is not.53 But, Heidegger warns, to talk of the possibility of the *logos* being true or false, is not necessarily to imply a conception of truth that involves ‘agreement’ between what is said and what it is said of. While Heidegger is not against the idea of truth as this sort of agreement, there is a more fundamental and prior discovery that is validly called true. So agreement is not the primary sense of *aletheia* in which “the entities of which one is talking must be taken out of their hiddenness; one must let them be seen as something un hidden (*ἀληθές*); that is they must be discovered.”54 It is this description of truth that I will draw on as I outline Polanyi’s view of the scientific enterprise; in Heideggerian terms, Polanyi paints a picture of science as discourse which dis covers or unconceals how things are and, when that discourse is public, it invites others to open themselves to and endorse the same vision of reality. In agreement with Rorty, this Heideggerian/Polanyian view of discovery has no need of a ‘mirror of nature’ in the mind to mediate or mentally re present the real and the public discourse about it: discourse *reveals*.

This understanding of truth as *aletheia* and *logos* as discourse in the sense of a “mode of letting something be seen” means that *logos* is not “the primary ‘locus’ of truth.”55 While *logos* can be true, truth as unconcealment is prior to and not confined to *logos*. Heidegger says, in *Being and Time*, that it would be both unjustified and a misunderstanding of the Greek conception of truth, to accept a view which “has become quite customary nowadays, [where] one defines ‘truth’ as something that ‘really’

54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 57.
pertains to judgment”;\textsuperscript{56} judgment comes later, assertion later still, and truth is not limited to them. Heidegger cites the Greek tradition where seeing and hearing for example, directly discover colours and sounds, and, at the most primordial level, where \textit{noein} is an infallible perception: “Pure \textit{noeinf} is the perception of the simplest determinate ways of Being which entities as such may possess, and it perceives them just by looking at them.”\textsuperscript{57}

So for Heidegger disclosedness (\textit{Erschlossenheit}) or unconcealment (\textit{Unverborgenheit}) is the most original meaning of truth. It is about letting what is, reveal itself without interference, which is at the core of his project as he leaves behind that philosophical history that had become the mediator of all experience and thinking in order that he may return “to the things themselves.”\textsuperscript{58} Thus it is now clear how much Heidegger breaks with philosophical tradition. According to him, philosophy since Plato has limited itself to a view of truth that is in error;\textsuperscript{59} it is a view that assumes that truth lies in a correspondence relationship between a proposition and its object and so is a property of propositions rather than things, and it is a view that assumes that the whole truth about an entity can be captured in this propositional truth.

As we have seen, one of the significant implications of Heidegger’s depiction of Dasein as Being-in-the-world is that the notion of an ‘external world’ is also radically re-thought, although not done away with. Again, the subject–object dichotomy is dismembered, which, for some, seems to imply a fall into a form of idealism or a relativism that denies the existence of, or at least the intelligibility of talk of, an external world. But that sort of language doesn’t capture the issue at all; Heidegger does not reject the world or, for that matter, the usefulness of the natural sciences. That is not his point. It is the nature of Dasein’s being-in and ‘knowing’ its world that necessitates a major rethinking of how the relationship with that world is construed. In Carman’s words, for Heidegger, “a world \textit{is} a world by being structured by norms, ways, means,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{56. Ibid.}
\footnote{57. Ibid.}
\footnote{58. Ibid., 58.}
\footnote{59. Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” 176.}
\end{footnotes}
purposes, and ‘for-the-sakes-of,’ which constitute the point of what we do. We inhabit a world not simply by confronting objects in perception and judgment, but by pursuing ends, participating in practices, occupying social roles, establishing at least presumptive identities. A world is not an object standing over against a subject; it is where we live our lives, the milieu in which we dwell,**60** and, I would add—resisting Carman’s residual distinction between the world and the “we” that inhabit it—we are universally constituted by not just being in that world but by being part of that world and by a mutual hermeneutic constitution of world and ‘inhabiting subject’.

The fact that there can be no separation of world and knowing subject does not however lead to an ‘anything goes’ relativism. While Heidegger is adamant that truth can only be understood in the context of Dasein’s dwelling in this world, and therefore is ‘relative’ to Dasein, he rejects a relativism that does away with the universal validity of truth or with the reality of the entities in themselves that are part of the world:

> Because the kind of Being that is essential to truth is of the character of Dasein, all truth is relative to Dasein’s Being. Does this relativity signify that all truth is ‘subjective’? If one Interprets ‘subjective’ as ‘left to the subject’s discretion’, then it certainly does not. For uncovering, in the sense which is most its own, takes asserting out of the province of ‘subjective’ discretion, and brings the uncovering Dasein face to face with the entities themselves. And only because ‘truth’, as uncovering, is a kind of Being which belongs to Dasein, can it be taken out of the province of Dasein’s discretion. Even the ‘universal validity’ of truth is rooted solely in the fact that Dasein can uncover entities in themselves and free them. Only so can these entities in themselves be binding for every possible assertion—that is, for every way of pointing them out.**61**

So, says Carman, Heidegger is an ontic realist “in that he believes in the occurrent existence of, in Putnam’s words, ‘some fixed totality of mind-independent objects.’”**62**

So what sort of view of truth is Heidegger proposing at this point? The traditional ‘correspondence theory’ of truth is that of a correspondence between a subject’s understanding or representation of an object (that is, some sort of ‘mental idea’) and a state of affairs or object itself independent of the subject. For Heidegger, the idea of a correspondence of like things between proposition and object is incoherent.

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**60.** Heidegger, *Being and Time*, xix.

**61.** Ibid., 270.

Like Rorty, Heidegger rejects this theory of truth but in so doing does not reject the possibility of the correspondence of an assertion with the world; he is against the correspondence theory of truth, but not the idea of correspondence or accord. In “On the Essence of Truth,” he highlights the incongruity of thinking of truth as mapping one thing onto another, totally unlike, sort of thing: “Correspondence here cannot signify a thing-like approximation between dissimilar kinds of things. The essence of the correspondence is determined rather by the kind of relation that obtains between the statement and the thing.”63 What the statement does is not to mirror the entity, as if a statement or proposition were a miniature or a copy of the entity, but rather to bring the entity into an open space and present it in a certain aspect which reveals that about the entity of which the statement speaks; it allows that entity to present itself as it is in itself. “What is stated by the presentative statement is said of the presented thing in just such a manner as that thing, as presented, is.”64 So the subject of a statement is not a thing in the mind, but the entity itself in the world, and a statement, which predicates something of that entity, does not contain a reference to a mental object but to the entity itself, which can have something predicated of it. Thus for Heidegger, there is no mental representation, which is meant to correspond to a reality outside the mind. To say of Heidegger’s ubiquitous hammer that it is heavy is to state something about the real hammer directly apprehended; the hammer of the statement is about the real one not mediated by a mental construction.

Furthermore, the statement or proposition itself, which offers truth as correctness or a conforming between statement and entity, is dependent on the prior notion of truth as the unconcealedness of the entity. Without the already unconcealed, no statement can be made, or, putting it in terms to be discussed later, the pre-linguistic understanding in which truth resides comes before any formalised truth claim. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” arising from lectures given some ten years after Being and Time, Heidegger talks of the familiar but incomplete understanding of what truth is and again describes the primordial sense of truth as unconcealment. Even the Greeks, who

64. Ibid.
used *aletheia*, misdirected its meaning into “discussion of a derivative essence of truth”\(^6\) that would dominate later philosophy and which focuses on propositional knowledge. Heidegger affirms this sense of truth as correctness, saying that “truth means today and has long meant the conformity of knowledge with the matter,” but, he says, “the matter must show itself to be such if knowledge and the proposition that forms and expresses knowledge are to be able to conform to it; otherwise the matter cannot become binding on the proposition.” So, the matter itself must first “stand forth out of concealment” and then it becomes possible for a proposition to be true by this conformation with the true that is unconcealed. So Heidegger is not rejecting the view that propositional truth has always, rightly, meant this correctness or conformity, but, he says, this “correctness in representation … stands and falls with truth as unconcealment of beings.”\(^6\) It is this primordial meaning of truth, pointed to by *aletheia*, that underlies the understanding of truth as correctness. While we might recognise our presuppositions at a cognitive level, even then we are thinking at a level removed from the truth revealed and known pre-assertorically. In fact, in order for a cognition, let alone an assertion, to conform to anything, that entity must have been precognitively known and form part of *our* world. In Heidegger’s words, “The entire realm in which this ‘conforming to something’ goes on must already occur as a whole in the unconcealed … With all our correct representations we would get nowhere, we could not even presuppose that there already is manifest something to which we can conform ourselves, unless the unconcealment of beings had already exposed us to, placed us in that cleared realm in which every being stands for us and from which it withdraws.”\(^6\)

In other words, we already know a world before we know a particular, which only makes sense as part of that world; even our hermeneutics, which recognises the place and ubiquity of presuppositions, can only function once we have our precognised knowledge of how things are. As we will see in later in this chapter, our understanding (in Heidegger’s sense), which is our basis of Being-in-the-world, comes before our

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66. Ibid., 176-177.
67. Ibid., 177.
formalised knowing in the sense of having a cognition that conforms to a particular matter, and it comes long before assertions or propositions are put to the task; those who will never delve into hermeneutics or epistemology nevertheless understand and know the world and themselves as Being-in-the-world. In addition, despite the fact that ‘the given’ is not given in an unveiled way, the world is not just of our making.

Foundational to the universal intent and provisionality of all truth claims of HUFPaT, Heidegger asserts both the independence of being and the hubris in the idea that it can be mastered or that it is a construction of our own making: “things are, and human beings, gifts, and sacrifices are, animals and plants are, equipment and works are. … There is much in being that man cannot master. There is but little that comes to be known. What is known remains inexact, what is mastered insecure. Beings are never of our making, or even merely our representations, as it might all too easily seem.”

Heidegger uses the visual image of a clearing to describe the ‘space’ in which truth is grasped when unconcealed; it is the open space that allows beings to be; “thanks to this clearing, beings are unconcealed in certain changing degrees.” A great work of art for example, reveals truth, as it “holds open the open region of the world.” So, for Heidegger, truth becomes an event; it is a revealing or an unconcealing of an aspect of an entity. This event occurs in the open space or clearing where, although the knowing Dasein takes a stance of openness and concern towards the entity, perhaps through a proposition or assertion, truth is primordially a “happening” and, as unconcealment, it “is neither an attribute of matters in the sense of beings, nor one of propositions.”

While Heidegger doesn’t emphasise this event-like aspect of truth in Being and Time or “On the Essence of Truth,” he does so in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” written a few years later. I will take up this characteristic of disclosure in the discussion of mediality that follows, because the medial nature of the event of unconcealment contributes to the argument for HUFPaT, particularly highlighting the necessary provisionality of all

68. Ibid., 178.
69. Heidegger, Being and Time, 171, 214.
71. Ibid., 170.
72. Ibid., 179.
knowing. However, first there is another aspect of Heidegger’s disclosure that should be noted: unconcealment is always paired with concealment.

Heidegger’s view of the uncovering of truth has a counter-intuitive corollary that all uncovering also involves a covering up. Just as seeing an object from one perspective removes the possibility of seeing it from other perspectives at the same time, so every uncovering is also a covering of something else. One might imagine a confined archaeological site with no possibility of removing soil and debris from the dig, so, as one part is excavated to reveal its treasures, another part is covered over; while the site becomes better known it is never exposed in its entirety. So, Heidegger can say, “truth in its essence is un-truth”73 (because concealing always goes with unconcealing; because “at bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary”74) and the picture he paints is one of a constant dynamism between denial and revealing—“the strife of clearing and concealing” is at the heart of truth as aspects of beings are revealed and disappear.75 Apart from Heidegger’s bringing primordial unconcealment into the ambit of truth, the further implications of this dance between unconcealing and concealing for HUFPaT are twofold. Firstly, the relationship between Dasein and a reality that both reveals and hides itself, gives the entities known a quasi-agency as knowers find themselves ‘in play’ (to invoke what we will see is a Gadamerian idea) with entities that have a ‘life’ of their own. Secondly, if concealment is always an aspect of revealing then any claim to truth is necessarily provisional, conscious as it is of the unfinished business of unconcealment and of the new and multiple visions of truth that are as yet unknown but arise from this play with reality. I will comment on both of these implications briefly.

Heidegger’s way of describing unconcealment and concealment hints at attributing agency to even inanimate entities, allowing them to “refuse” or to “dissemble” as they present themselves as other than they are. While I don’t suggest that this is Heidegger’s proposal, the idea of imputed agency might be a way of making

73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 180.
sense of the medial event of the disclosure of truth. While it is beyond the bounds of this thesis to develop the idea further, perhaps the only way to pay due respect to the human inability to simply ‘make knowing happen’ is to impute a form of agency to that which in truth has no agency. The idea of imputed agency would also span aspects of the gap between understanding others and understanding the natural world. Discovery in science can be thought of as a dialogue with the natural world and a fusion of horizons out of which truth emerges. And in the case of orthodox Christian faith, the agency of God in revelation is actual not imputed, as (in a different way) is the agency involved in all forms of human-to-human communication.

Ironically, one form that covering-up can take is when the thing discovered is distanced from its primordial sources by being expressed in the form of an assertion. While the assertion aims to reveal truth in the most perspicuous way, it risks doing the opposite as it abstracts from the primordial unconcealment of that of which it speaks. So it runs the risk of leaving it understood “in an empty way … losing its indigenous character.” The danger is that what “has been primordially ‘within our grasp’ may become hardened so that we can no longer grasp it.” To turn the glory of a sunset or the multifarious meanings of a hammer into the rigidity of the proposition is not to reveal the entity better but to obscure it as it really is.

Another implication of Heidegger’s description of truth as unconcealing (and concealing) is that there is no possibility of, nor even understanding of what it would mean to have, the complete truth, because there are any number of ways that what is can reveal itself. Truth is inexhaustible just as the number of correct assertions is inexhaustible, so the truth about an entity can never be exhaustively stated. This goes beyond just the limits that are implied by a straightforward perspectivism where the complete truth might be imagined to consist in the sum of all perspectives. It is an ontological perspectivism that, in the light of the knower’s being partly constituted by the world known, means that there are endless possibilities for new perspectives as the knower and its world grow in their essential togetherness. However, this is not

76. Heidegger, Being and Time, 60-61.
77. Ibid., 61.
necessarily a fall into an ontological relativism, as we will see, because the endless possibilities of perspectives are nevertheless perspectives on the same thing as it reveals itself in a theoretically infinite number of ways. Nor is every perspective true: the event of truth can also reveal that a proposition or perspective is false.

3.4 The mediality of truth and knowing

I turn now to a discussion of the medial nature of truth and knowing, which arises out of Heidegger’s description of Dasein and Being-in-the-world, as well as his description of the rootedness of truth in an event prior to all cognising or asserting. This essential mediality contributes further to the claim that all knowing is provisional, based as it is on a dynamic that is not fully explicable and in which truth is never complete. It also highlights the engagement of the knower in a way that I describe using Polanyi’s ‘fiduciary’ in order to capture the responsible commitment of the engaged knower as opposed to the disengagement of the putative objective subject.

In his elaboration of the open space or the clearing in which truth occurs Heidegger claims to be introducing “a transformation in thinking”. It is not that truth has not occurred before, he says, but that the open space and this understanding of truth as arising out of the open space has not been explicated before. This revolutionary thinking reveals that truth is essentially the event of letting things be—an exercise Heidegger calls “freedom,” using the word in an idiosyncratic way. He says, “That which is opened up, that to which a presentative statement as correct corresponds, are beings opened up … Freedom for what is opened up in an open region lets beings be the beings they are.” So freedom in this sense is not the commonly understood positive and negative freedoms of human action. It is rather a disclosive “letting beings be”; it is a stepping back—a sort of engagement, but one that makes a space so that beings “might reveal themselves with respect to what and how they are.” In fact, this freedom

79. Ibid., 125, 127.
80. Ibid., 125.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
is the ground of possibility of truth, leading Heidegger to say that “the essence of truth is freedom,” 83 where ‘essence’ in this statement “is understood as the ground of the inner possibility of what is initially and generally admitted as known.” So, this freedom or letting things be, allows the disclosure that is the primordial sense of truth, and it is this primordial sense that is the ground of possibility for the traditional sense of truth, which sees truth only as a characteristic of correct assertions or propositions “that are asserted of an ‘object’ by a human ‘subject’ and then ‘are valid’ somewhere, in what sphere we know not.” 84 However, this traditional sense is derivative: truth is first and foremost the discovery of Being and beings.

Although he only mentions mediality once in Being and Time, 85 Heidegger’s image of the clearing or open region, 86 which is made possible by his particular rendering of ‘freedom’, is nevertheless a medial one; on the one hand, the agent, Dasein, is responsible for making the clearing or open region, but on the other hand Dasein must wait for the event of truth when entities reveal themselves in that clearing. So this open stance or openness of the human exercise of freedom occurs in a middle space between activity and passivity; it consists of both engagement and withdrawal. It is active in that it exhibits what Heidegger calls concern or care on the part of Dasein, and it is passive in that it lies open to the entity, unable to force the entity to reveal itself. The entity too—the opened—is both passive, in its not forcing itself upon Dasein, but active too in that it gives and withholds itself.

Part of the claim of this thesis is that it is legitimate to walk the middle road between Cartesian certainty and, for want of a more definitive description, postmodern epistemic agnosticism—a road characterised by the universal yet provisional nature of truth claims. This epistemic middle way is one paralleled and also entailed by the ontological medial space in which truth emerges, therefore there are clear implications

83. Ibid., 123.
84. Ibid., 127.
85. Heidegger, Being and Time, 51.
86. Ibid., 171, 214. In Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth,” 123. Heidegger makes a number of references to the clearing in his marginal notes to various editions of the essay but only one almost at the end of the actual text where he says, “The name of this clearing [Lichtung] is ἀλήθεια” (p. 138). In the essay he prefers to speak of the “open region” (e.g., pp. 123-127.)
for epistemology to be drawn from a discussion of mediality that responds to the hints in Heidegger but works through their implications. Consequently, before moving on to Heidegger’s understanding of understanding and interpretation, I will consider further the medial nature of truth. I will also return to mediality when discussing Gadamer’s fusion of horizons, which can be described as medial and event-like.

‘The middle’ refers to a voice of the verb, not found in English, that is neither active nor passive; the middle voice places the initiative on neither the human subject as acted upon (“He was transported to Australia.”) nor on the subject as sole initiator (“She decided to emigrate.”). Eberhard points out that in English one of the few instances that has neither active nor passive connotations is ‘to get married’. Marriage is neither something one does to someone else (in the active and transitive sense—unless one is a marriage celebrant) and nor is it something done to oneself by another. I suggest that there are other verbs in English with implied (but not grammatical) mediality: some particularly pertinent to this enquiry are those such as ‘know’, ‘understand’, ‘see’, ‘comprehend’, ‘recognise’, or ‘discover’, all of which require agency on the part of the subject of the verb but none of which guarantee that the subject will in fact know or understand or see, etc. When we turn to Gadamer we will see that he also has a conception of mediality, particularly exhibited in his argument from analogy, mentioned above, of the nature of play, where the ‘subject’ is not in command of the game but rather is an active but not controlling participant in an event. Philosophical hermeneutics emphasises the idea of this medial balance within the event of understanding as something that both happens to the human subject and for which the agency of the subject is essential; the subject and object of the process of understanding are not clearly defined or distinguished. Eberhard says, “Instead of focusing on the subject and the object, on the agent and the patient, on who affects what/is affected by


what, etc., the middle voice brings to language the subject in his or her relation to the process the verb expresses. “In the middle, the subject is neither in control, nor controlled; “the event happens and I am its subject.” The challenge here is that of finding an adequate description of this relationship between ‘subject’ and ‘world’.

This difficulty of convincingly describing the balance between a disengaged human subject and a human subject that disappears altogether is considered by Mackinlay in “Phenomenality in the Middle: Marion, Romano and the Hermeneutics of the Event,” as he compares the perspectives of Marion and Romano on the agency of the knower. I turn briefly to that discussion because it helps to clarify the medial position in the face of the Heideggerian danger of entirely losing the poles of immanent subject and transcendent object; we are still human agents, but we don’t make discovery happen—these are two essential and notionally distinct poles, notwithstanding the fact that they cannot be separated. Mackinlay’s discussion also highlights that Heidegger’s thinking doesn’t just have ramifications for epistemology: those ramifications are rooted in a changed ontology. It’s not just that knowing is radically re-thought but it is re-thought because the nature of the knower and the known is radically re-thought.

Mackinlay speaks of the balance between the “Cartesian and Kantian legacy of constitution by a subject” and the dethroning of the human subject to such an extent that, in effect, the phenomena become the new subject acting on the inert object that is the human person. Marion criticises Heidegger for leaving Dasein as the constituting agent of its own self, and in Romano’s terms, Dasein “remains the measure of all phenomenality” and, the criticism runs, Heidegger maintains traces of “the prerogatives conferred on the modern subject since Descartes.” But, says Mackinlay, Marion goes to the other extreme of “reducing the subject to a passive recipient on

89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Mackinlay, “Phenomenality in the Middle: Marion, Romano, and the Hermeneutics of the Event.”
92. Ibid., 180.
94. Ibid., 17-18.
whom phenomena impose themselves.” Romano’s account on the other hand, walks the line between active and passive human subject; focusing on hermeneutics, “allows him to describe the appearing of phenomena as a genuine encounter between the perceiver and the perceived. That is to say, Romano comes closer to a ‘middle voice’ than does Marion.” Hence Mackinlay argues for a middle-voiced understanding of “the encounter between the immanence of consciousness and the transcendence of the objects of experience,” which does not slide with Heidegger into an overemphasis on the subject’s self-constitution, or, with Marion, into the absolute givenness of the phenomenon to a passive subject. Mackinlay discusses Marion’s view of the event, which is given to the subject apparently without cause and not as an intentional act of consciousness; Marion emphasises the phenomenon’s ‘self’, making the phenomenon sound as if it has an independent agency. “Intentionality is inverted,” says Marion, and in Mackinlay’s words, “instead of making the phenomenon, I am made by it.” Marion’s recipient is the adonné, or the gifted, “he whose function consists in receiving what is … given to him” and, says Mackinlay, “Marion maintains that the receptivity of the adonné ‘mediates’ or ‘goes beyond’ passivity and activity … a claim that supports his view that Dasein’s facticity should be understood in the middle voice.” But, says Mackinlay, Marion doesn’t have the balance right; he doesn’t find a middle way because, with his emphasis on the initiative of the phenomena and his desire to “avoid producing another heir to the Cartesian ego … [Marion] tends strongly toward depicting the adonné as passive.” This has implications for the scope of hermeneutics

95. Mackinlay, “Phenomenality in the Middle: Marion, Romano, and the Hermeneutics of the Event,” 167.
96. Ibid., 169.
97. Ibid., 181.
100. Marion, Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, 322.
102. Ibid.
because the passivity of Marion’s recipient/adonné “excludes acts of interpretation from the actual happening of events.”103

While Marion insists that he does have a place for hermeneutics, Mackinlay points to the important distinction between epistemic and Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics, saying that Marion only adopts hermeneutics in its derivative epistemic sense, making no concessions to the underlying ontological hermeneutic reality of Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world.104 This means that Marion limits hermeneutics to that interpretation that occurs only after the appearance of phenomena. Against this limited view of hermeneutics, Mackinlay insists, rightly, that hermeneutics goes all the way down: “A condition of possibility for any act of cognition or consciousness (including the epistemic type of hermeneutic interpretations admitted by Marion) is that there be some relation between consciousness and whatever is given to it as phenomena. Because this relation shapes the ways we interpret the meaning of both consciousness and phenomena, it can properly be referred to as hermeneutic—and, if it is hermeneutic, it is hermeneutic in a fundamental sense.”105 It is Heidegger’s description of Dasein and its world, outlined above, which teases out this hermeneutic relation between consciousness and phenomena. And it this relation that contributes to the necessary provisionality of all knowing beyond the contingent provisionality arising from the epistemic limitations of human beings.

The issue that this sort of discussion raises is that of how to take seriously, on the one hand, the initiative of human knowing activity, and, on the other hand, the limitless possibilities of event-like disclosure of truth that come from outside the realm of conscious possibilities. While Dasein is constituted by possibilities, there are nevertheless limits on them: there are some things not possible for Dasein because the world is this way rather than that, and there are some things imposed on Dasein that appear unexpectedly in its world. Dasein is always projecting but part of its projecting, interpreting activity is accommodating to the genuinely new. The challenge here is to

103. Ibid., 172.
104. Ibid., 173.
105. Ibid.
maintain some sort of notion of subjectivity and objectivity that does not fall back into separating subject and object from their co-constitution as Being-in-the-world. I will consider more of Dasein’s possibilities below as well as in the next chapter, where I relate this discussion to Polanyi’s description of tacit knowing—especially the problem, central to science, of the discovery of that which is completely outside the realm of conceivable possibilities. But first I will continue following Mackinlay’s discussion because it contributes to this question of uncovering the radically new.

Mackinlay describes Romano’s distinction between two types of events, the ‘evental’ and the ‘evential’, the first described as ‘innerworldly facts’ that occur within the world of the subject while the second are world-changing events that reconfigure the possibilities of that world.106 The first type, says Mackinlay, is paralleled by Heidegger’s ontic realm, the second by the ontological, where an event changes the structures of Being. So one sort of event fulfils possibilities while the other changes and opens up new possibilities.107 In the realm of the natural sciences, a pertinent example of these two sorts of events might be the difference between Kuhn’s normal and his revolutionary science.108 In the case of the evential, like revolutionary science, and following Romano’s description,109 there is a logical gap that makes outcomes unpredictable and apparently not caused. In the eventual and in scientific revolutions, the meaning of the world is at stake and changed; in Polanyian or Kuhnian terms the pre- and post-evential subjects live in “different worlds.”110 But the question that has dogged discussions of incommensurability in philosophy of science and more generally, is to what extent this language of ‘different worlds’ is rhetorical flourish to emphasise previously incomprehensible changes and to what extent it is making claims about

106. Romano, Event and World, 26-27.
108. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.
109. Romano, Event and World, 41.

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genuine radical difference.\textsuperscript{111} Mackinlay says, in the case of Romano, that the evential reconfigures my world in such a way that “none of my possibilities and projects remain unaffected.”\textsuperscript{112} But he also says, “Importantly, while the world opened by the [evential] event is genuinely new, it results from a reconfiguration of the existing world rather than from a radically new creation.”\textsuperscript{113} The question to be asked, then, is whether the difference between the evental and the evential is a difference in kind or is one of degree. Is there a claim to \textit{radical} newness, and if so what can this mean except as another way of saying that the evential is the (at least formerly) totally incomprehensible?

It seems that comprehensibility is tied closely with causality: because the evental or innerworldly fact occurs within the subject’s space of possibilities it is foreseeable, and amenable to causal explanation. In contrast, the evential is radically inexplicable, with its origins lying outside the world of possibilities, so, within the phenomenological world of the subject, the evential finds no causes. The evential “\textit{reconfigures} the world for the one to whom it happens,”\textsuperscript{114} says Romano; it comes out of the blue, as it were. Mackinlay says “because this shift in understanding [—the reconfiguration caused by the evential—] takes place within the new horizon that an event opens, it becomes possible only after an event has already happened.”\textsuperscript{115} But given that the evential does come to pass, and that, in retrospect, it has been incorporated into the field of possibilities (at least of a mentally healthy subject), this raises the question of how we understand possibilities of which we are not conscious. Whatever the evential brings comes to be seen retrospectively as a possibility of which we were not aware. This seems to imply that the distinction between the evental and the

\textsuperscript{111} Cf. Davidson’s discussion of conceptual schemes in Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in \textit{Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). See also, the discussion on incommensurability following Kuhn’s \textit{Structure of Scientific Revolutions}.

\textsuperscript{112} Mackinlay, “Phenomenality in the Middle: Marion, Romano, and the Hermeneutics of the Event,” 175.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{114} Romano, \textit{Event and World}, 42.

\textsuperscript{115} Mackinlay, “Phenomenality in the Middle: Marion, Romano, and the Hermeneutics of the Event,” 175.
eventual rests on a temporal difference between possibilities of which we are conscious and those of which we have no comprehension until after they come to pass. But this distinction will not do for a hermeneutics of a Heideggerian/Gadamerian nature, which rests squarely on the lack of conscious awareness of most of what makes up the human subject’s world. Gadamer’s oft-quoted comment is pertinent: “The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.”

This discussion of mediality is useful in bringing together Heidegger’s self-projecting Dasein with the possibility of world-changing possibilities arriving from ‘outside’ the self—again, the example of scientific discoveries and ‘revolutions’ is apposite and will be further taken up in the next chapter. Romano’s “swinging middle,” as Mackinlay calls it, allows for the constituting self at the evental, innerworldly level but also for the irruption into that self’s world by the evential, which transfigures that world. But having highlighted these two aspects of the ‘constitution of the self’, the question, which is parallel to that in the philosophy of science over incommensurability, remains: to what extent are the evental and the evential radically different? I suggest that they are not, but rather that it is more convincing to think of them as lying on a continuum ranging from normal everyday possibilities to the totally unexpected and life-changing. Some events are more transfiguring than others and our world can be reconfigured to some degree by even mundane, innerworldly projection and action. In fact, many innerworldly events bring unexpected consequences. Does this mean that while they were thought to be ‘normal’ they become evential as their consequences are understood? This would seem to be special pleading for which there is no need. Rather than paint a stark difference in kind, it seems more true to experience to recognise that all events arise from, and give rise to, possibilities with both evental and evential aspects in varying degrees. Further, what conception of the truly radically...
new could there be that would make sense? Like Heidegger’s raw present-at-hand that would become incomprehensible if it lost all connection with Dasein’s world that gives it meaning, the radically new, which irrupts totally from outside of any familiar structure of meaning, can mean nothing until it finds a place in Dasein’s world. Having been disclosed in the medial space it is already incorporated by Dasein into its Being-in-the-world and so is discovered not to be radically new but merely surprising or unexpected to a greater or lesser degree. Nothing in the world is totally incomprehensible. As we will see in the next chapter, Polanyi points out that, in the Meno, Plato discusses the paradox of discovery—to use the terms of the current discussion, the ‘evential’—which is rooted in the inexplicable recognition of a good problem. 118

While the epistemic middle, between certainty and epistemic agnosticism, is not the same ‘middle’ as that found in discussion of the mediality of ontological hermeneutics there is nevertheless a clear parallel, and the concept of mediality offers a useful way of describing the middle ground in which all epistemic commitments are actually (and provisionally) made. If the possibility of this middle ground is excluded, the conversation is dominated by arguments about whether some sort of certainty is possible, with the implication that without (at least theoretical) grounds for certainty we are rationally obliged to turn to scepticism. But if all understanding is medial, and hence provisional, at the most profound (ontological) level then there is no possibility of the objective, independent subject of the God’s-Eye View; epistemology too must be governed by mediality for, as has been well recognised in the last century and more, it can never hope to reformulate a satisfactory foundational/Cartesian answer to the question of knowledge. The question itself must be reconstrued as this thesis and its interlocutors do. The mediality arising from a Heideggerian ontology also has implications for the possibility of givenness and claims to universal truth; this medial view affirms that the event of understanding is to some extent conditioned by what is given, leaving no room for the totally self-constituting subject that floats free to create

118. Polanyi, Tacit Dimension, 21-22.
any possibilities for itself. Rather, reality impinges in the eventual, and all (true) understanding is constrained by the limits imposed by that which is outside human control.

Having digressed somewhat from Heidegger in this discussion of the medial space in which truth emerges, I return now to the question of Heidegger’s use of ‘truth’. Given Heidegger’s description, and given the medial encounter between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ described above, is it necessary to incorporate truth as aletheia or disclosure into the concept of truth as Heidegger does in Being and Time? Terminologically, no. As Heidegger much later came to believe, it might have been clearer not to have done so. But on the other hand, in doing so Heidegger dramatically points to the most fundamental aspect of truth—whether it be called ‘truth’ or ‘the grounds of possibility of truth’—uncovering the assumed or necessary foundation that lies behind the concept of truth as correctness. Truth as correctness is the tip of an iceberg, the whole of which is the phenomenon of truth founded on disclosure and which comes to be expressed explicitly, perhaps, as assertion, perhaps in other ways. Truth as correctness refers to the descriptive indicator—whether propositional or not, and inadequate as it is—that helps another to experience the medial event of the disclosure of truth. To say that truth just is correctness without remainder is to ignore the phenomenological question of what has happened that makes it possible to say, for example, that snow is white. It is to ignore the fact that we are always already in a world where truth is disclosed, long before we theorise, before we attempt to communicate ‘truths’ in words and assertions. To rule out disclosure as an aspect of truth as Tugendhat does,119 in his critique of Heidegger, on the grounds that truth as disclosure does not have the critical resources necessary for it to be counted as truth and that only assertions or propositions offer that normative dimension, is to fail to recognise the unbreakable relationship between the assertion and disclosure: assertions are about disclosing and refer to that which is disclosed. The assertion discloses. Critical judgment opens itself to the assertion and in the assertion that discloses truth we simply see that the phenomenon is as it is. On the other hand the

assertion may disclose falsehood or even nothing at all, in which case critical judgment concludes that “this is not how it is,” or that “this reveals nothing.” As an English language proposition “snow is white” discloses; it brings something into the open. Furthermore, “snow is red” also discloses truth by revealing a possibility that is judged as false. And “broan is sook” reveals nothing at all; the ‘assertion’ that does not disclose is meaningless as an assertion, despite its appearance as grammatically correct and apparently meaningful. This relationship between disclosure and assertion is not symmetrical: while a true or false assertion, if it is understood, always discloses, disclosure does not always result in assertion. Disclosure, for example that snow is white, can occur without being said, without assertion, without communication, and indeed without being consciously thought; the truth that snow is white does not need to be asserted to be true or to be known. The person who is deaf and mute can know many things to be true without ever putting them into words.

I turn now to the phenomenon of understanding, or rather, to Heidegger’s description of what I have called a knowing dynamic that ranges from tacit, unarticulated understanding through interpretation, assertion, and perhaps to formal proposition.

3.5 The dynamic of knowing: From pre-understanding to proposition

We have seen that a Heideggerian ontology and understanding of truth as disclosure entails the mediality of truth; truth is disclosed in a medial space where neither a knowing ‘subject’ nor a known ‘object’ is solely responsible for the event of disclosure. Yet both are mutually ‘responsible’—if I might be allowed to impute responsibility to the non-human entities about which we speak and assert things, and which we reveal in our dialogue with ourselves and others. But from the point of view of Dasein, how are we to describe this arrival and explication of truth? I claim, drawing on Heidegger, that there is a progressive dynamic of knowing starting from, and always dependent upon, the ontological, primordial, pre-cognitive understanding through the cognitive process of interpretation then to the explicit stage as interpretation expresses itself in Heidegger’s pre-verbal discourse, which may perhaps be verbalised in a
conversation with another or written in a text. And, for those who formalise their thinking, it may include deliberate assertion and, at its most formalised, crafted propositions, which attempt unsuccessfully to reduce illocutionary force to nought in an effort at transparent explicitness. In terms of HUFPaT, this dynamic of knowing is further description of our universally hermeneutic engagement with our world; I am describing aspects of what ‘knowing’ must consist in after Heidegger’s ontological turn.

As I think about these things I look out the window of the hideaway cottage retreat where I have withdrawn to work on this thesis. I take in the trees, some old, some newly planted, and the grass, mown maybe two weeks ago (shall I mow it before I leave?), and the slope of the land, and the chicken-wire fence, and the broken logs and plants in the garden, the car under the tree, the magpies and the distant white-noise of the sea along with the clock ticking on the wall. I see things I expect to see as well as the unexpected and perhaps the very surprising. I do not think consciously of these things—unless jolted by thesis-consciousness to write about them or by a surprising event breaking into cognition by its unexpectedness—and I do not deliberately put them in the context of where I am or why, or who owns the house, or what I will do today or tomorrow or did yesterday. Yet all this and so much more goes to making up my pre-cognised understanding of what I see and hear and smell, and of how it all contributes to who I am and my own possibilities (to finish this thesis or to give up, to be a jogger on the beach in the dark tonight, or … ), all of which shares in the meaning that is always and already a part of my experience and which provides the ‘background’ that allows me to consciously ponder my experience in this moment—where I have come from and where I might go. I start to reflect, to interpret, to make sense of the birdsong as birdsong (and as magpies, evoking fond, decades-old memories of magpies in palm trees), and to make sense of small plants as newly planted along with attached meanings drawn from tacit, unthought inferences (perhaps wrong: did the plant actually grow from a windblown seed?), but still I do all this without conscious words and far from asserting anything. The phone rings and I start to explain to someone where I am and why I am on retreat. Or perhaps it is my wife (a subliminal reminder, never brought to consciousness or words, that I have left her for a thesis-purpose) and I want to tell her of
how it is here. She listens and makes some sense of my words but hopelessly incompletely. I would never try, and could never succeed at the attempt, to catalogue every object in my vision or sound or barely-thought conclusion drawn from old grass cuttings or the smell of fresh paint. And were I to do so, the more I proceeded with the minutiae, with an ever-growing list of descriptions and propositions, the more I would fail in conveying meaning, conveying the lived experience of being-here as me, now, with all the possibilities for the coming seconds, hours, years … in the looking-forward-to that makes me the being that I am.

In all of this I experience truth, I know, I understand how things are, how they fit one with another. I do not know all the inexhaustible and seamless web of truth of which I am part and parcel, and some of what I think I know may be wrong. But long before I try to express my understanding as a host of specific knowledge claims, which, in their punctuality only make the matrix of truth, which is my world, harder to see, I nevertheless know truth that is revealed, unconcealed, in letting all these interconnected things be, just as they are, in all their physical and temporal interconnectedness and apart from which they are meaningless.

But what of the proposition, the assertion, the description, the email home, which attempt to communicate how things are for me? They are only inadequate pointers, gestures in a certain direction, as I wrestle with the challenge of disclosing to others how it is in my world of Heidegger’s “average everydayness”¹²⁰ where truth lies in my pre-cognised understanding and that of all those who for one reason or other never think to “explain how things are” to others, or who scrabble for the meaning of ‘proposition’ or ‘assertion’ or even of ‘truth’ except in the everyday sense of just knowing how things are and just knowing correctness when they see it, but sometimes too, getting it wrong. The point is that if this hermeneutic disclosedness is not the primordial meaning of truth then we fall into the intellectual elitism of denying that those not prone to propositional language can know the truth. With Heidegger, knowing is our way of being in the world and it is the way of being of every Dasein: “knowing

¹²⁰ Heidegger, Being and Time, 69-70.
the world (νοεῖν)—or rather addressing oneself to the ‘world’ and discussing it (λόγος)—thus functions as the primary mode of Being-in-the-world.”\textsuperscript{121} And, also with Heidegger, I am blurring the distinction between knowing and understanding and, with Polanyi too, suggesting that only a reconceptualised ‘knowing’ that incorporates tacit elements, both epistemically and ontologically, adequately describes our experience, along with the conditions that make it possible, of arriving at explicit claims about how things are.

So, in the light of the discussion above, how, should we speak of ‘knowing’ and ‘knowledge’? The traditional move is that of reserving ‘knowledge’ for the theorised, explicit and usually propositional statements of belief. On a continuum from understanding through interpretation to discourse and assertion (inspired by Heidegger and Polanyi) knowledge would be a particular type of explicit and justifying discourse. But my claim is more egalitarian; I want to protect the right of the non-reflective person to say, “I know.” The unreflective person, like us all, makes myriad tacit or implied knowledge claims, some with utter confidence, some less so, but all affirming (although mostly non-assertorically) to have a grasp on how things are. These claims are held (for they are not necessarily ‘made’) without satisfying the demands of those who insist on knowledge as justified true belief (plus a Gettier clause to deal with lucky, but nevertheless justified, true beliefs). Therefore I turn now to Heidegger’s explication of the relationship between knowledge, understanding and interpretation, the structure of which I have already drawn on in my description of lived experience above and which I am calling a knowing dynamic.

\textit{Heidegger on knowing}

Heidegger’s understanding of Dasein as being always immersed in a world with which it is ontically familiar means that it always ‘knows’ the world. But as soon as this knowing becomes thematised, it is also distorted into the erroneous superficial model of the subject-object relation, which does not coincide with the relationship between

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 85.
Dasein and the world. This ordinary sense of knowing, says Heidegger, based on the dichotomy between subject and object, posits an entity known, nature, for example, and the entity doing the knowing. But, he says, “the knowing which knows” nature is neither found in the entity known nor is it perceivable in the knowing entity, the human thing. Hence, according to the ordinary view, if knowing is not found in nature nor by observing the human who knows (when observed from the outside as it were, as another thing) so knowing must reside in an inner sphere inside Dasein and divorced from the outer sphere of nature. This assumption, that knowing is ‘inside’ Dasein raises irresolvable problems, particularly that of how anything can be assumed about the relationship between subject and object without first understanding the nature of knowing; what is knowing? Heidegger’s answer is that the subject-object or inside-outside dichotomy obscures what is revealed when knowing is realised to be a mode of being of Dasein; “Knowing the world is a mode of being of Dasein such that this mode is ontically founded in its basic constitution, in being-in-the-world.” So Heidegger, like Rorty after him, rejects as incomprehensible the idea that there is an inner sphere of the subject where knowledge resides in correspondence to the outer sphere of objects in the ‘external world’. It is worth quoting Heidegger at length about the problems and unasked questions relating to this ‘inside-outside’ view of knowledge:

The question of the kind of Being which belongs to this knowing subject is left entirely unasked, though whenever its knowing gets handled, its way of Being is already included tacitly in one’s theme. Of course we are sometimes assured that we are certainly not to think of the subject’s “inside” [Innen] and its ‘inner sphere’ as a sort of ‘box’ or ‘cabinet’. But when one asks for the positive signification of this ‘inside’ of immanence in which knowing is proximally enclosed, or when one inquires how this ‘Being inside’ [“Innenseins”] which knowing possesses has its own character of Being grounded in the kind of Being which belongs to the subject, then silence reigns. And no matter how this inner sphere may get interpreted, if one does no more than ask how knowing makes its way ‘out of’ it and achieves ‘transcendence’, it becomes evident that the knowing which presents such enigmas will remain problematical unless one has previously clarified how it is and what it is.

122. Ibid., 86-87.
124. Ibid., 161. Heidegger’s italics.
125. Heidegger, Being and Time, 87.
So, what remains tacit but necessary to the concept of knowing, if it is to engage with the so-called external world, is to understand that “knowing is a kind of Being which belongs to Being-in-the-world.”\textsuperscript{126} But put this way, Heidegger asks if this nullifies the problem of knowledge: “for what is left to be asked if one presupposes that knowing is already ‘alongside’ its world, when it is not supposed to reach that world except in the transcending of the subject?”\textsuperscript{127} Therefore the so-called problem of knowledge, in the light of Heidegger’s analysis, is no longer that of explicating the relationship between a subject and an object separated by an inside-outside gap, but rather amounts to the question of analysing “the phenomenon of knowing as such and the kind of Being which belongs to the knower.”\textsuperscript{128}

If Dasein is always involved with its world, then the traditional problem of knowledge is seen to be spurious. (Although, says Heidegger dryly, “it is nowhere prescribed that there must be a problem of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{129}) The true problems of knowledge arise from realising the ontologically hermeneutic nature of the knower: “knowing is now not a comportment that would be added to an entity which does not yet ‘have’ a world, which is free from any relation to its world. Rather, knowing is always a mode of being of Dasein on the basis of its already being involved with the world.” And, like the discussion above of the ontological foundation of ‘truth’ in unconcealment, the error of epistemology is that “it fails to regard what it means by knowing in its original phenomenal datum as a way of being of Dasein.”\textsuperscript{130} If knowing is a mode of Dasein’s being then the true problematic of knowledge is the question of how Dasein, in its normal non-cognitive mode of being, can disclose the world in which it is already constitutionally engaged.\textsuperscript{131} So the basis of investigating the phenomena and structure of knowledge is the realisation that knowing is always already a mode of

\begin{itemize}
\item[126.] Ibid., 88. Heidegger’s italics.
\item[127.] Ibid. Heidegger’s italics.
\item[128.] Ibid.
\item[129.] Heidegger, \textit{History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena}, 162.
\item[130.] Ibid., 161.
\item[131.] Ibid., 162.
\end{itemize}
Dasein’s Being-in-the-world: “knowing is not something by which Dasein, not yet in the world at first, upon knowing would produce a relation to the world.”132

This analysis, which ties the primordial sense of knowing to Dasein’s Being-in-the-world, then leaves the question of the nature of the more conventionally understood knowledge, such as that of the natural sciences, to be answered. According to Heidegger, if knowing the present-at-hand is to be possible, Dasein must hold back from its normal concernful having-to-do with the world in order to adopt a different mode of Being-in—that of “tarrying alongside”133—which allows Dasein to look explicitly at the way entities within-the-world look. Heidegger describes this deliberate focus on what is present-at-hand as a “dwelling autonomously alongside entities within-the-world” and, akin to that ‘freedom’ we have already discussed, it depends on “a holding-oneself-back from any manipulation or utilization,” so making it possible to deal explicitly with the entities encountered.134 He describes the outcome of this process “when one addresses oneself to something as something and discusses it as such” as a perception, or a particular form of interpretation in its broadest sense, which secures and communicates such knowledge by making it determinate in propositions, which are preserved or retained. He says, warning against construing it as a method that then falls into a correspondence view of truth, “this perceptive retention of an assertion about something is itself a way of Being-in-the-world; it is not to be Interpreted as a ‘procedure’ by which a subject provides itself with representations [Vorstellungen] of something which remain stored up ‘inside’ as having been thus appropriated, and with regard to which the question of how they ‘agree’ with actuality can occasionally arise.”135

Knowing is not, then, for Heidegger, a matter of escaping an inner subjective world to bridge a gap; rather, there is no gap because Dasein, in its principal manner of being is always ‘outside’ and involved with the entities it comes across in the already-

132. Ibid.
133. Heidegger, Being and Time, 88.
134. Ibid., 89.
135. Ibid.
encountered and discovered world.\textsuperscript{136} Preferring to emphasise this ‘outsideness’ or ‘in-the-worldness’ of Dasein, Heidegger resists the idea that knowledge is grasped and then stored up somewhere separated from the world in which it is disclosed and of which Dasein is a part. In a memorable phrase he says, “the perceiving of what is known is not a process of returning with one’s booty to the ‘cabinet’ of consciousness after one has gone out and grasped it; even in perceiving, retaining, and preserving, the Dasein which knows \textit{remains outside}, and it does so as Dasein.”\textsuperscript{137}

Having outlined this view of knowing that is so far removed from conscious practices that aim to ‘know’, Heidegger recognises formalised, deliberate ways of knowing, or rather, of managing in one way or another what is already known, and he refers to formal ‘scientific’ knowledge practices, which are derivative on this basic mode of knowing that needs to be interpreted before it becomes ‘knowledge’ in the traditional sense of the word. Such practices are possible, but they rest on “a world which has already been discovered in Dasein itself.”\textsuperscript{138} This sort of abstracted knowing can take on a life of its own, but, Heidegger warns, “a ‘commercium’ of the subject with a world does not get \textit{created} for the first time by knowing, nor does it \textit{arise} from some way in which the world acts upon a subject. Knowing is a mode of Dasein founded upon Being-in-the-world. Thus Being-in-the-world, as a basic state, must be Interpreted \textit{beforehand}.”\textsuperscript{139}

\textit{Heidegger on understanding}

I turn now to the ‘beforehand’: to that understanding and interpretation, which, on the continuum of the knowing dynamic, lie prior to, and are a precondition for, any explicit interpretation. To anticipate what we will see in the following discussion, Heidegger’s existential or primary understanding of understanding is untheorised and not to be confused with the more usual sense which would include what he calls interpretation and discourse, even if it does not arrive at explicit assertion.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.
Before turning directly to Heidegger’s principal treatment of existential understanding, I will invoke Blattner’s useful (but, I suggest, incomplete) discussion, which differentiates between ‘state-characteristics’, which are brute facts, and ‘ability-characteristics’. Blattner says, “Heidegger claims … that all of Dasein’s characteristics are ability-characteristics,”140 which is to say that to understand is to be capable of something and not simply to know something in a cognitive way. (Blattner, however, might emphasis more, that for Heidegger, this capability is first and foremost Dasein’s competence to manage Being rather than ‘doing something’ capably.141) Using the example of Jones, a woman who is six feet tall, Blattner says that while Jones may be six feet tall, Jones’ understanding is a matter of being capable of, or competent at being six feet tall. This ability is one of managing six-foot-tallness, of getting around in the world as a six-foot-tall person, of knowing how to stand and move and to speak to people as a woman who is six feet tall. So while being six feet tall is a biological fact, Jones as a Dasein, and unlike a tree of the same height, understands that fact as evidenced through her self-interpretation that works itself out in her ability to express the fact in certain ways. So, for Dasein, being six feet tall is an ability-characteristic, not merely a state-characteristic.142

Blattner cites Heidegger’s recognition that Dasein can be treated as merely occurrent or present-at-hand in which case its factual state-characteristics are abstracted from its existential features. But, says Heidegger, this is to disregard “the existential state of Being-in.”143 This distinction is between what Heidegger calls the ontic ‘factuality’ of the present-at-hand and the ontological ‘facticity’ of Dasein.144 This distinctiveness of Dasein, as being defined by its possibilities and not its factual properties, is emphasised on the first page of Division 1 of Being and Time: “The ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence. Accordingly those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not ‘properties’ present-at-hand of some entity which ‘looks’

140. Blattner, Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism, 34.
141. Heidegger, Being and Time, 183.
142. Blattner, Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism, 35-36.
143. Heidegger, Being and Time, 82.
144. Ibid.
so and so and is itself present-at-hand; they are in each case possible ways for it to be, and no more than that.”

There are two sorts of possibility at play in Heidegger’s description of Dasein: that which pertains to the present-at-hand and that which belongs uniquely to Dasein: possibility with respect to the present-at-hand is mere possibility signifying what is not yet realised and, because it is contingent, may not be realised. But possibility in the case of Dasein’s existence describes Dasein’s very being. Heidegger says: “As a modal category of presence-at-hand, possibility signifies what is not yet actual and what is not at any time necessary. It characterizes the merely possible. Ontologically it is on a lower level than actuality and necessity. On the other hand, possibility as an existentiale is the most primordial and ultimate positive way in which Dasein is characterized ontologically.” While the present-at-hand has “merely possible” ways for it to be, Dasein’s possibilities are abilities and, as Blattner summarises, “we end up with a dualistic picture of Dasein, who when conceived properly is characterized only as having self-interpretive abilities, but when conceived improperly (abstractly) is also characterized as having state-characteristics.”

For Heidegger, ‘understanding’ as an ability is the ability to make meaning; it is Dasein’s act of integrating its familiarity with the world and itself into something meaningful; it is the ability to relate items in life’s inventory, present-at-hand, ready-to-hand, and Dasein itself, which only becomes itself in this relating that is understanding. So understanding has both a noun and a verb form: capacity and activity. In its integrative function it is like the hub at the centre of a spoked wheel holding everything in place so the wheel can go forward. Speaking of Dasein’s involvement in the world in terms of a meaningful “context of relations” or ways of relating, Heidegger speaks of the act of understanding holding these disclosed relations “with familiarity” as it assigns meaning to them: “the understanding lets itself make assignments both in these

145. Ibid., 67.
146. Ibid., 183.
147. Blattner, Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism, 39.
relationships themselves and of them. The relational character which these relationships of assigning possess, we take as one of signifying.”\(^{149}\)

In his main treatment of understanding in *Being and Time* (Section 31: “Being-there as Understanding”), Heidegger speaks of three senses of understanding, two of which fall under what he calls “understanding … as a fundamental existentiale of Dasein,”\(^{150}\) pointing to the ontological level at which understanding occurs. One of the latter is directed towards Dasein’s own possibilities and the other is directed towards Dasein’s *dealings* or everyday being in the world. The third and derivative sense of understanding is that, which has been seen as the sort of cognition appropriate to the human sciences (as opposed to *explanation* which is taken to be the form of cognition of the natural sciences). In this third sense, understanding concerns human enterprises, reflecting the rapport of the human-human connection, while explanation is the means of describing the relations within the ‘natural’ and law-driven ‘external world’.

Heidegger refers to this common sense of understanding as “*one* possible kind of cognizing among others (as distinguished, for instance from ‘explaining’)” and, he says, this meaning, like explaining, must be interpreted “as an existential derivative of that primary understanding.”\(^{151}\) Later, in Division II of *Being and Time*, he also distinguishes Dasein’s primary understanding from this other sense: “With the term ‘understanding’ we have in mind a fundamental existentiale, which is neither a definite species of cognition distinguished, let us say, from explaining and conceiving, nor any cognition at all in the sense of grasping something thematically. ... In all explanation one uncovers understandingly that which one cannot understand; and all explanation is thus rooted in Dasein’s primary understanding.”\(^{152}\)

Distinct from this cognitive understanding, Heidegger’s sense of ‘understanding’ is as an existential structure “equiprimordial” with what he calls state-of-mind and a basic mode of Dasein’s being: “State-of-mind is *one* of the existential

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149. Ibid., 120.
150. Ibid., 192.
151. Ibid., 182.
152. Ibid., 385.
structures in which the Being of the ‘there’ maintains itself. Equiprimordial with it in constituting this Being is understanding. ... If we Interpret understanding as a fundamental *existentialia*, this indicates that this phenomenon is conceived as a basic mode of Dasein’s *Being*. And, he reiterates, “as *existentialia*, states-of-mind and understanding characterize the primordial disclosedness of Being-in-the-world.” In his commentary on *Being and Time* Dreyfus says that while state-of-mind is the condition for things mattering to Dasein, “understanding reveals some actions as doable, as making sense, and others as not, or, better, it does not reveal these other possibilities as possibilities at all.”

If understanding is, in one sense, a skilful dealing or competence, or, following Blattner, an ability-characteristic, it can refer to both Dasein’s own Being—Jones’ ability to manage herself and get around in the world as a six-foot-tall woman, for example—or to the ready-to-hand—for example, the surgeon managing the scalpel. But in both cases understanding is transparent (and is, as we will see, a case of Polanyi’s ‘tacit knowing’); it is not the cognitive or explicit process, which will later be revealed in *interpretation*. Leaving aside for the moment the ontic understanding (as practical competence), and also that meaning which is normally paired with explanation, I turn now to discuss further the ontological, primordial sense of understanding that is an essential mode of being of Dasein and which underlies all knowing.

Heidegger expands on this primordial sense of understanding intrinsic to Dasein’s Being as follows: “In the ‘for-the-sake-of-which’, existing Being-in-the-world is disclosed as such, and this disclosedness we have called ‘understanding’.” Later he says, “*Understanding is the existential Being of Dasein’s own potentiality-for-Being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses in itself what its Being is capable*
The possibilities of Dasein, that is, the “what its Being is capable of,” are the key to grasping primordial understanding (and so, to grasping Heidegger’s conception of Dasein). These are not possibilities realized, but rather possibilities as possibilities, and are constitutive of Dasein’s being. Earlier, and in another context, Heidegger uses an apposite phrase: “Higher than actuality stands possibility.” Dasein’s understanding of itself is always in terms of its possibilities; it is a transparent, tacit awareness of its possibilities and of the totality of involvements in the ready-to-hand entities in its world. And, as Foulds elaborates, “understanding in this sense, not only discloses things to us but also us to ourselves as potentiality-for-being; indeed, it ‘pertains to the whole basic state of being-in-the-world’.”

Heidegger describes the structure of understanding which “always press[es] forward into possibilities,” as ‘projection’. This knowing and pressing into possibilities of projection has two equiprimordial aspects: “the understanding projects Dasein’s Being both upon its ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ and upon significance, as the worldhood of its current world.” But this projection is tacit and involves neither a goal, nor a commitment to a plan, nor even an explicit or thematic grasp of its possibilities; it is just what Dasein always already finds itself doing. In fact to grasp its possibilities thematically, says Heidegger, would prevent them being possibilities, and it is this projecting of possibilities that contributes to Dasein’s constitution: “As projecting, understanding is the kind of Being of Dasein in which it is its possibilities as possibilities.”

Blattner suggests there is a tension in this description of projection. He says that there seem to be two functions of projection: one as pure possibility where “projection … lets [the possibility] be as such,” and another as a possibility that is being

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158. Ibid., 184. Heidegger’s italics.
159. Ibid., 63.
162. Ibid., 185.
163. Ibid. Heidegger’s italics.
164. Ibid.
exercised or ‘pressed into’. According to Blattner, Heidegger seems to subsume these two functions under the notion of projection; on the one hand, says Blattner, projection is “opening up the range of possibilities” and on the other hand, it is “pressing ahead into one of them.”\textsuperscript{165} Blattner favours the latter, claiming that “there is good reason to believe, however, that projection refers only to the second phenomenon, namely, determining oneself as someone by pressing ahead into a possible way to be.”\textsuperscript{166} Pressing ahead into one possibility entails forgoing the pursuit of some others. To use Blattner’s example, if Jones is pressing into the possibility of being a simultaneous interpreter, then she is that possibility and has forgone the possibility of being a German doctoral student. “She is her for-the-sake(s)-of-which and not the other possibilities that she forgoes.”\textsuperscript{167}

I suggest that Blattner is in danger of suggesting that Heidegger’s projection is simply an act of the will. In doing so he risks losing the existential sense of projection, which is crucial to both Heidegger’s view of Dasein and to the argument of this thesis that so much of human knowing is derivative upon tacit, inexplicable, and ontological levels of ‘knowing’. Blattner seems to confuse ‘pressing into possibilities’ with the realisation of a possibility so that it no longer remains just a possibility but almost an achievement. For Heidegger, Dasein’s essence lies in the possibilities and, yes, even in the pressing into possibilities, but not in what he might have called ‘the having pressed into possibilities’ so that the possibility is in some sense a done thing. If this is right, then while it is true that Dasein in practice gives up one possibility when it presses into another, it is nevertheless the continuing possibilities and the pressing-in itself that defines Dasein and not arriving or fulfilling a specific possibility. Dreyfus cites an example: one can achieve a specific goal of being an academic with tenure and salary but being a teacher is a constant pressing in to that possibility which is never arrived at. But while Dreyfus says it is the latter that defines Dasein not the former.\textsuperscript{168} I suggest he

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\textsuperscript{165} Blattner, \textit{Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism}, 41.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
is only partly right: being a teacher is, in Heidegger’s terms, more ontic than ontological. Returning to Blattner, it is true that his distinction is between the field of possibilities versus pressing into one, and that he doesn’t talk of arriving or of fulfilling possibilities such that they are no longer possibilities. But he seems close to the sense of closing off a possibility by pressing into it when he talks of “determining oneself as someone by pressing ahead into a possible way to be.” Is the emphasis here on pressing (continuous) which sounds Heideggerian, or on the definitive tone of “determining” and “to be,” which does not accord with Heidegger, whose emphasis highlights the not-having-arrived nature of Dasein’s self-understanding: “As long as it is, Dasein always has understood itself and always will understand itself in terms of possibilities.”

Another way of thinking about the tension between opening up the field of possibilities and pressing into one of them is to see that they are both part of the same movement; to press into possibilities is first to press into the field of possibilities, which narrows as the pressing progresses and in fact will never cease to offer new and more nuanced possibilities. That is to say that the field is not a finite one of discrete possibilities; both the field and its more specific possibilities are fluid, and a problem arises when they are seen in a mathematically discrete way that allows a tension between opening up the field and ‘choosing’ one as if it were discrete and unchanging. Rather, to draw on a parallel with Gadamer’s notion of effective history, which we will discuss in the chapter 5, the history of past ‘pressings in’ to possibilities partially constitutes the current horizon of possibilities and in turn Dasein’s being.

In order to express this ‘reality of possibilities’, which is the essence of Dasein’s being, Heidegger differentiates between factuality and facticity, where factuality is attributed to that which is present-at-hand and even to Dasein when seen as present-at-hand, but facticity is the recognition that the ‘facts’ about Dasein go beyond the present-at-hand and are associated with its Being-in-the-world and with its possibilities.  

171. Ibid., 82-83.
Hence Dasein’s being is always more than it factually is (assuming it were possible to reduce it to something present-at-hand), because intrinsic to its being is its “potentiality-for-Being” or its “Being-possible.”\textsuperscript{172} So, Heidegger can say, “it is existentially that which, in its potentiality-for-Being, it is \textit{not yet}. Only because the Being of the ‘there’ receives its Constitution through understanding and through the character of understanding as projection, only because it \textit{is} what it becomes (or alternatively does not become), can it say to itself ‘Become what you are’, and say this with understanding.”\textsuperscript{173}

In his discussion of understanding in \textit{History of the Concept of Time}, Heidegger talks of the \textit{“full understandability”} that comes when the understanding extends to “world, co-Dasein, and one’s own Dasein.”\textsuperscript{174} Out of this arises the inevitably hermeneutic nature of all understanding (which is central to HUFPaT) because there is no independently understood starting point from which to understand another reality separate from that standpoint—something that will have implications for later discussion in this thesis of knowing in the natural sciences. Heidegger says, “it can thus be the case that the enactment of understanding at the time thematically refers in particular to the world, for example, or to the co-Dasein of others or to my own Dasein. But in each case the phenomena which belong to the scope of discoveredness, that is, to the full understandability of Dasein itself, are always co-understood.”\textsuperscript{175} In other words there is a web of interconnected relations, which is part and parcel of Dasein’s Being-in-the-world, and which cannot be ruptured in order to organise a neat subject-object dichotomy in the interests of clarity—a way of thinking that only results in obscurity passing for lucidity. Heidegger says that it is ignorance of the structure of Dasein that leads to the deception that lies in thinking “that there is a separate understanding of a bare world or of an alien Dasein.”\textsuperscript{176} Hence all understanding is a hermeneutic exercise because Dasein, the human knower, is hermeneutic through and through: “This

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 185.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 185-186.
\textsuperscript{174} Heidegger, \textit{History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena}, 258.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
structure of understanding, which is grounded in Dasein itself and which defines understanding as the enactment of the being of discoveredness, provides crucial orientation points for all problems of hermeneutics. Such a hermeneutics is possible only on the basis of the explication of Dasein itself, the kind of being to which understanding belongs.”177

**Understanding nature as in principle incomprehensible**

In the light of the central role that knowing in the natural sciences plays in this thesis, it is appropriate to comment briefly on what Heidegger says about the conditions of possibility of science. After doing so I will turn to interpretation, which is the next stage on Heidegger’s continuum from primordial understanding to explicit assertion. With respect to science and nature Heidegger says, “it is only on the basis of understandability that there is a possible access to something which is in principle incomprehensible, that is, to nature. Something like nature can be discovered only because there is history, because Dasein is itself the primarily historical being. And only because of this are there natural sciences.”178 What does this mean? In the first place, why is nature “in principle incomprehensible” for Heidegger? The reason, as I alluded to in the discussion above of what I called the ‘raw present-at-hand’, is that nature lies outside the circle of meaningfulness circumscribed by Dasein and its world and so is literally incomprehensible; as raw nature it is not found in the world of Dasein’s involvements. So, “nature is incomprehensible” is, for Heidegger, an analytic statement. When dealing with the reality of the ‘external world’ in *History of the Concept of Time*, he says, “nature is what is in principle explainable and to be explained because it is in principle incomprehensible … because it is the ‘unworlded’ world, insofar as we take nature in this extreme sense of the entity as it is discovered in physics. … As the incomprehensible, it is likewise the entity which simply does not have the character of Dasein at all, while Dasein is the entity which is comprehensible

177. Ibid.
178. Ibid. Heidegger’s italics.
in principle.”179 Dreyfus puts it this way: “to say that physical nature is incomprehensible is to say that the nature studied by physics is abstracted from the everyday world, i.e., does not fit into the referential whole and connect up with our purposes and for-the-sake-of-whichs. It therefore has no significance in Heidegger’s sense of the term.”180

A second question also arises from the above reference to science: why is it that “only because Dasein is itself the primarily historical being … are there natural sciences”? The answer lies in Dasein’s only being able to make sense of the world from Dasein’s own point of view as historically situated and constituted. Keller states succinctly what is a general and core claim arising from philosophical hermeneutics, which applies to the natural sciences as a case in point: “We have no way of grasping what entities are like which is independent of the conditions under which we can discover them to be thus and such. This gives rise to a claim of primacy for interpretation and, in particular, self-interpretation, since such interpretation is the key to the explication of any understanding.” Consequently, the hermeneutic circle is not one which we are able to adopt at will, but rather both describes and arises from the ontological state in which we find ourselves, since, says Keller, “any understanding one has of anything implicitly involves one’s own context of understanding.”181

I will return to the implications of Heidegger’s views for science and to Dasein’s historicality in later chapters—briefly, to argue that such a view supports the thoroughgoing provisionality of all truth claims, even those of the natural sciences, and that all knowing, including that in science, is conditioned by being hermeneutic in the ontological sense.

Interpretation: understanding made explicit ‘as’ something, but not yet predicated

If understanding as an existential mode of being of Dasein leaves possibilities unthematised and unappropriated, then interpretation is the spelling out of those possibilities. It is the bringing to light of what was only implicit in understanding and so what was known tacitly (to use Polanyi’s term) is taken ‘as’ something. Heidegger calls interpretation the “development of the understanding.”182 In interpretation, he says, “the understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it. In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself. [It is] the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding.”183 Ramberg says our fundamental familiarity with the world, understood as intelligible, “is brought to reflective consciousness through the work of interpretation.”184 In *History of the Concept of Time* (lecture material delivered only two years before the publication of *Being and Time*) Heidegger expresses this relationship between interpretation and understanding in another way and ties it to discovery:185 “The cultivation of understanding is accomplished in *expository interpretation*. We saw that understanding is the enactment of the being of discoveredness. Interpretation is the mode of enactment of this enactment of the being of discoveredness. Interpretation is the basic form of all knowing. … This means that interpretation as such does not actually disclose, for that is what understanding or Dasein itself takes care of. Interpretation always only takes care of *bringing out what is disclosed* as a cultivation of the possibilities inherent in an understanding.”186

As we have seen, in Heidegger’s sense of the word, understanding is not the *product* of an interpretive process or method, but rather is the *precondition* for interpretation: “Such interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter

183. Ibid., 188-189.
184. Ramberg and Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics.”
185. Although, as Blattner warns, using Heidegger’s lecture material to interpret his published *magnum opus* carries its risks. See Blattner, *Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism*, xiv-xvi.
does not arise from the former.”\textsuperscript{187} So while we normally say “ah, now I understand,” Heidegger’s Dasein says “I understood before I even thought about it.” (I will return to this point in chapter 5 where I suggest that Gadamer conceives of the relationship between understanding and interpretation in a slightly different way to Heidegger.) So, in contrast to the tacit nature of understanding, Heidegger emphasises the explicit, although not propositional or predicative, nature of interpretation, which arises from its ‘as’ structure: “To say that ‘circumspection discovers’ means that the ‘world’ which has already been understood comes to be interpreted. The ready-to-hand comes explicitly into the sight which understands. … that which is explicitly understood—has the structure of something as something. … The ‘as’ makes up the structure of the explicitness of something that is understood. It constitutes the interpretation. … That which is understood gets Articulated when the entity to be understood is brought close interpretatively by taking as our clue the ‘something as something’.”\textsuperscript{188} So for example, while the instrument nurse tacitly understands the place and possibilities of a scalpel in the world of the operating theatre, when the call “Scalpel!” rings out, the focus is then explicitly on the interpretation of the instrument as scalpel. But this articulation or explicitness found in interpretation has not yet reached the level of assertion, which Heidegger describes as the taking apart of that which is already understood and interpreted as something. To use his example, the door is understood tacitly, and interpreted explicitly as a door, but still only at a “pre-predicative level” which is not yet “an assertion which definitely characterizes it.”\textsuperscript{189} Any thematic assertion comes after both the understanding, and the articulation that is interpretation, so “in such an assertion the ‘as’ does not turn up for the first time; it just gets expressed for the first time.”\textsuperscript{190}

If, in this knowing dynamic, understanding and interpretation both come before assertion, in what sense are they distinct from one another? On the one hand, as outlined

\textsuperscript{187} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 188.  
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 189-190.  
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 189.  
\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 190.
above, interpretation is the explicit (but non-predicative) seeing something ‘as’ something, which is a counterpart to, or extension of, the more tacit understanding. But, on the other hand, Heidegger says that even if “the ‘as’ is ontically unexpressed” (i.e. there is no explicit assertion), “this must not seduce us into overlooking it as a constitutive state for understanding, existential and a priori.”¹⁹¹ In some sense, at least in the case of the ready-to-hand which he is discussing at this point, Heidegger wants to say that while understanding and interpretation are distinct, they are nevertheless always found together. In fact, to try and separate interpretation from understanding would misunderstand “the specific way in which interpretation functions as disclosure.”¹⁹² It is not that there is some sort of more primordial understanding to which the ‘as’ structure is added, but rather, merely understanding includes the ‘as’: “This grasping which is free of the ‘as’, is a privation of the kind of seeing in which one merely understands. … In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a ‘signification’ over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by interpretation.”¹⁹³ Heidegger recognises this indistinct relationship between understanding and interpretation when he says that the explicit nature of interpretation can recede “into an understanding which does not stand out from the background,”¹⁹⁴ and more specifically when he says that “we must investigate whether what has become visible as the fore-structure of understanding and the as-structure of interpretation, does not itself already present us with a unitary phenomenon.”¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹. Ibid.
¹⁹². Ibid.
¹⁹³. Ibid., 190-191.
¹⁹⁴. Ibid., 191.
¹⁹⁵. Ibid., 192.
The circle of understanding in Heidegger

The question of the relationship between understanding and interpretation of the ready-to-hand leads Heidegger into one of the circularity of understanding via the notions of ‘fore-having’, ‘fore-sight’, and ‘fore-conception’, all of which ground interpretation. Pointing to what we will encounter in Gadamer as prejudices or prejudgments and in Polanyi as a form of tacit knowledge, he says that “in every case [circumspective everyday interpretation] is grounded in something we have in advance—in a fore-having.” Interpretation’s “working out” or appropriation of understanding unveils what is understood and it does so “under the guidance of a point of view, which fixes that with regard to which what is understood is to be interpreted. In every case interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance—in a fore-sight.” The outcome is an interpretation that “has already decided for a definite way of conceiving [the entity], either with finality or with reservations.” This he calls a fore-conception, which may be “drawn from the entity itself, or the interpretation can force the entity into concepts to which it is opposed.” The result of this analysis is that interpretation is never a case of “a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us.” This raises again the question above of whether understanding and interpretation do not, in fact, form a single unified phenomenon, and the problem of circularity arises if, as he says, “any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted.” How, asks Heidegger, can interpretation “bring any scientific results to maturity without moving in a circle” which must, by the inherent logical structure, inevitably be a vicious circle? This question of the circularity of knowledge and discovery is, as we will see, one raised as long ago as Plato in the Meno, and one Polanyi turns to in explaining the process of scientific

196. Note that Heidegger doesn’t use the term ‘hermeneutic circle’ in Being and Time; he does speak of the circle of/in understanding (194-195).
198. Ibid., 191.
199. Ibid., 191-192.
200. Ibid., 192.
201. Ibid., 194.
202. Ibid.
discovery. For neither Heidegger, nor Polanyi, is this a vicious, or even an avoidable circle, with the implication that, in Heidegger’s words, “what is decisive is not to get out of the circle but to come into it in the right way.” But, as we will see, Polanyi’s discussion of the circle of discovery does not plumb the ontological depths that Heidegger does. The latter says, “the ‘circle’ in understanding belongs to the structure of meaning, and the latter phenomenon is rooted in the existential constitution of Dasein—that is, in the understanding which interprets. An entity for which, as Being-in-the-world, its Being is itself an issue, has, ontologically, a circular structure.”

Heidegger suggests that one possible erroneous response to this circularity is the thought that interpretation in the human sciences must resign itself to “less rigorous possibilities of knowing” while it laments the fact that the ideal of avoiding the circle is not yet possible, although there might remain “the hope of creating some time a historiology which would be as independent of the standpoint of the observer as our knowledge of Nature is supposed to be.” But, says Heidegger, such a view, which holds on to the ideal of avoiding the circle, or which accepts it as an inevitable imperfection, completely misunderstands understanding. This ideal, taken from the natural sciences, which have “the legitimate task of grasping the present-at-hand in its essential unintelligibility,” mistakes itself for the whole of understanding. In fact, “such an ideal is itself only a subspecies of understanding.” For Heidegger, as we have seen, this circle is not one primarily of logic or epistemology: it is ontological and it concerns the basic conditions of the possibility of interpretation and of the Being of Dasein. It cannot be escaped, because “it is the expression of the existential fore-structure of Dasein itself.” And it is not vicious because in it “is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.” This circularity is fundamental because Dasein’s Being is ontologically co-constituted with its world as Dasein projects

205. Ibid.
206. Ibid., 194.
207. Ibid.
208. Ibid., 195.
209. Ibid.
itself forward onto its possibilities but possibilities which at the same time already constitute Dasein itself: so, “an entity for which, as Being-in-the-world, its Being is itself an issue, has, ontologically, a circular structure.”210 In Caputo’s words, “we understand as we do because we exist as we do.”211

3.6 Conclusion

In this thesis I claim that a particular understanding of hermeneutics entails that all knowing is characterised by certain features; if the picture painted by philosophical hermeneutics is a verisimilar description of the human ontological and epistemic condition then all knowing is described by HUFPaT. In this chapter I have mostly considered the ontological aspects of this claim by elaborating Heidegger’s views on truth as both correctness and disclosure and I have outlined aspects of his rethinking of the dichotomy between subject and object, which is necessitated by his description of Dasein’s ontological constitution as Being-in-the-world and the dynamic of knowing between the tacit and unarticulated understanding that goes to make up part of the nature of Dasein through interpretation to any explicit knowing found in assertions or propositions. I have also pointed out that both truth as disclosure and Dasein’s knowing engagement with truth are medial events. While I consider Heidegger’s view ‘overtheorised’ in its attempt to make distinctions where perhaps there are none, I hold that the aspects of that view that I have outlined above paint a much more adequate picture of the human ‘subject’ and its world than traditional views that separate knowing subject and world, and which, from a God’s-Eye perspective, make them both objects.

Before turning to more details of this hermeneutic view I will first attempt an opening salvo in favour of a review of common understandings of knowledge by examining the epitome of sure and objective knowledge—that of natural science. In


order to do so, in the following chapter, I will look at Michael Polanyi’s description of the outcome of science as *personal knowledge*. After that, in chapter 5, I will turn to Gadamer’s description of philosophical hermeneutics in practice before I respond to some of the challenges to this view of truth and knowing, particularly the claim that an approach that takes philosophical hermeneutics seriously inevitably results in a non-trivial form of relativism.
Chapter 4

Polanyi’s ‘Personal Knowledge’

In this chapter I will first move away from the ontological considerations of the previous chapter to outline Michael Polanyi’s view of knowing in the natural sciences. However, as we will see later in this chapter, his is a view that is consonant with HUFPaT, making a way for robust truth claims in science but doing so without falling into the positivist errors of Enlightenment epistemology outlined in previous chapters. If Polanyi’s view of the natural sciences is valid and if it can be incorporated into HUFPaT then it contributes to the argument that HUFPaT is a universal description of human knowing.

The truths that the natural sciences lay claim to are the epitome of sure knowledge—the endpoint of the quest for security about human epistemic pretensions. And the success of the natural sciences has seemed to many to the realisation of the Cartesian dream of forging a high road to truth, with the corollary that other paths, which cannot count on the certainty and predictable success offered by science are epistemically inferior. So, in the light of the position that science holds, at least in popular culture and amongst those unfamiliar with the philosophy of science, I will examine the nature of the knowledge claims of science and highlight the fiduciary, provisional and socially embedded elements of the scientific enterprise, demonstrating that, in various ways, it resembles the nature of knowing or understanding in other fields. If, as I claim, science is of this sort, then the criteria and expectations for serious knowledge claims need to be reassessed; or, in a more pessimistic reading of the situation, if science does not offer knowledge then no field can claim to do so.

With respect specifically to the social constitution of science, Barnes and Shapin outline the crisis of legitimation that this recognition portends: “Scientific knowledge would cease to have a privileged status.”¹ They say:

Science is a highly valued body of knowledge. Much depends upon its high credibility, upon its being perceived as an especially reliable, distinctive form of knowledge. … Those who benefit from an entity being perceived in this way are always under pressure to treat the entity as sacred and set-apart. By doing this, by insisting that the entity is different in essence from less-valued things, logically distinct and bounded-off, they legitimate and justify their own position. At present, many historians tend to separate science off and to establish its distinctiveness by reference to the individualistic epistemology they maintain. Hence a social epistemology will tend to be seen as a threat, even though occasionally, in such work as that of Polanyi and Kuhn, it has been itself employed to bound-off and justify science. A social epistemology erodes currently dominant legitimations of science.

In this chapter I will outline a view of knowing based on Michael Polanyi’s familiarity with science as it is practised; as we will see it is a view that is in many respects compatible with a hermeneutic epistemology and ontology. It is also a view that neither presents an ‘individualistic epistemology’ nor falls into a relativism or antirealism typical of some streams of more recent philosophy of science that highlight science’s social dimensions. The title phrase of Polanyi’s magnum opus, Personal Knowledge, captures his conviction that the subject and object of knowing are inevitably bound together, belying the Cartesian separation of the two that has dominated philosophical and popular thinking for so long. While Polanyi only briefly mentions connections with Heidegger and discussion of being, and does not use the language of hermeneutics, his epistemology is thoroughly hermeneutic, evidenced by its dependence on human interpretive judgment arising from a ‘dialogue’ with peers, texts, tradition, and culture, and his view also fits well with a hermeneutic ontology that sees the human knower as indwelling and integrated with a world. In fact, I suggest that an epistemology something like that of Polanyi is entailed by taking seriously Heidegger’s account of Dasein as Being-in-the-world.

Polanyi turned to epistemology and the philosophy of science from a distinguished career as a physical chemist during which he published over two hundred scientific papers. At the University of Manchester he vacated the chair of physical chemistry in 1946 to take up that of professor of social studies, created for him so that he could continue his wider explorations including those into the nature of science. In his various philosophical writings Polanyi attempts an answer to the fundamental

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2. Ibid., 63.
epistemological question of the justification of knowledge. Of *Personal Knowledge*,³ he says: “The principal purpose of this book is to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false.”⁴ There is no purely objective knowledge, according to Polanyi, and the ideal of objective detachment, so prominent in traditional epistemology and in common understandings of science, is incompatible with this recognition. Objective knowledge, understood as impersonal, disengaged, and definitive, is a contradiction in terms; human agents are inescapably committed to acting with fiduciary commitment based on sincere beliefs that they hold to be universally true. This they can do with confidence only when they have seen the error of equating knowledge with impersonal objectivism.⁵

In working out his theory of human knowing in reaction to an emphasis on disengaged objectivity Polanyi not only challenges those views that accept the possibility of detached, objective knowledge but also those views that reject this possibility while still accepting the *ideal* of knowledge as objective and impersonal. In this sense he is modifying the concept of knowledge by showing the errors with the way it has been commonly understood.⁶ The effect of objectivism, Polanyi says, is that it has “totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all that we know and cannot prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we *can* prove.”⁷ In challenging this ideal of knowledge as incoherent Polanyi put himself outside the mainstream debate in both epistemology and the philosophy of science, and partly for that reason has not received the recognition he deserves.

Polanyi demonstrates the incoherence of traditional epistemological aspirations by showing that all knowledge necessarily involves a non-objective element, which he terms ‘tacit knowledge’, the content of which is, in the final analysis, unspecifiable, and which therefore demands a personal or ‘subjective’ engagement on the part of the

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³. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*.
⁴. Ibid., 214.
⁵. Ibid. See, for example, pp. 266-267, 300-304, 324.
⁶. Ibid., vii.
⁷. Ibid., 286.
knower who, in the last analysis, must rely on their own judgment in making a claim to truth. While Polanyi does not use ‘provisional’ to describe his personal knowledge, provisionality as I describe it is an entailment of this tacit grounding, which means that knowing is never definitive: “it might conceivably be false.”\(^8\) This provisionality highlights the personal commitment required on the part of the knower in making a claim which is based ultimately and always on a fiduciary act for which no certain or further justification can be offered. To put this differently, all knowledge claims involve a personal act of entrusting oneself to that which is believed, based as it is on something actively believed by a committed agent to be true, despite the lack of conclusive proof. The contrast and conflict with certain conceptions of science is clear, says Polanyi, summing up the radical implications of his view: “The declared aim of modern science is to establish a strictly detached, objective knowledge. Any falling short of this ideal is accepted only as a temporary imperfection, which we must aim at eliminating. But suppose that tacit thought forms an indispensable part of all knowledge, then the ideal of eliminating all personal elements of knowledge would, in effect, aim at the destruction of all knowledge.”\(^9\)

Rejecting the ideal of scientific detachment, Polanyi wants instead to establish an alternative and more coherent understanding of human knowing\(^10\) and, for him, like Heidegger, the clue to understanding knowledge, including the formalised knowing of science, is in the everyday knowing found in perception. Polanyi says that scientific knowing is an extension of perception, which involves an integration of particulars into meaningful wholes along the lines described by Gestalt psychology. But while Gestalt psychology posited a mechanical equilibration of parts to coherent whole, Polanyi sees the whole as the “the outcome of deliberate integration revealing a hitherto hidden real entity.”\(^11\) So there is an inevitable element of personal judgment that makes all

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8. Ibid., 214.
empirical science inexact, says Polanyi, with the implication that all science is ultimately

grounded on an act of personal judgment … There are no strict rules for discovering things that hang together in nature, nor even for telling whether we should accept or reject an apparent coherence as a fact. There is always a residue of personal judgment involved in deciding whether to accept or reject any particular piece of evidence be it as a proof of a true regularity or, on the contrary, as a refutation of an apparent regularity. … All such integration is largely based, like perception itself, on tacit elements of which we have only a vague knowledge.\textsuperscript{12}

In asserting that strict objectivity or disengagement is not an attribute of even scientific knowledge, Polanyi inevitably bypasses the common concerns of other philosophers of science such as Russell\textsuperscript{13} and later Popper\textsuperscript{14} who focus respectively on the possibility of formalising the inductive process, and on the possibilities of rigorous verification or falsification. Such concerns, Polanyi holds, are not only misguided in their acceptance of the objectivist premise but as well, they fail due to their inability to offer a rational account of the origin of those hypotheses that any process of verification or falsification is supposed to formally test. It is this problem of scientific discovery that is crucial in understanding science, but is relegated to insignificance by those who have no explanation for the process and therefore concern themselves with how a hypothesis, once stated, could be verified or falsified. Popper, for example, in his confusingly named \textit{The Logic of Scientific Discovery}, relegates discovery to the concern of psychology and therefore deems that it is not to be rationally analysed.\textsuperscript{15} Polanyi’s extensive scientific experience leaves him in no doubt that scientific hypotheses are not random guesses, as others suggest, and neither are they explainable by psychological or other non-heuristically guided factors.\textsuperscript{16} Convinced that scientists are concerned with discovering reality and not simply more elegant logical correlations of data, Polanyi

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
focuses on discovery, which starts with “an intuitive perception of the … hidden reality present in nature,” as the main problem in understanding science and, indeed, all human knowing. So leaving aside the concern with rules of verification and falsification because “there are none which can be relied on in the last resort,” he searches for an explanation for the apparent success of scientists in uncovering this reality.\textsuperscript{18}

In order to fill out Polanyi’s understanding of knowing I turn now to further description of the elements he uses to build this view, in particular the nature and implications of tacit knowledge and its relationship to discovery, and then to its implications for my conception of knowing and truth. I will then consider the degree to which Polanyi’s views take cognisance of the social embeddedness of all knowledge. I will finish this chapter suggesting that while Polanyi does not invoke Heidegger except very briefly, there is an implicit ontology that is at least compatible with Heidegger’s understanding of Being-in-the-world and that, therefore, my view that HUFPaT is an accurate description of human knowing is supported ontologically by Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein and epistemologically by Polanyi’s analysis of science, which also has an ontological dimension compatible with HUFPaT.

4.1 The tacit dimension of knowing

We have seen that Polanyi is committed to the view that science is an extension of ordinary perception; hence it is to examples of everyday human perception in the world that he turns to elaborate his epistemology.\textsuperscript{19} In expounding his view of knowing, the first and most fundamental of Polanyi’s concepts is his innovative understanding of tacit knowing summed up in the phrase “we can know more than we can tell.”\textsuperscript{20} In Polanyi’s view the recognition of the role of tacit knowing is essential to any coherent theory of knowledge, and it is in ordinary perception that we find the most familiar instances. Part of HUFPaT’s claim that all knowing is both provisional and fiduciary

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 30. See also Prosch, \textit{Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition}, 95.
\textsuperscript{19} Polanyi, “The Creative Imagination,” 56.
\textsuperscript{20} Polanyi, \textit{Tacit Dimension}, 4.
lies in the fact that knowing is never entirely explicit; the knower always finds themselves in a situation demanding personal commitment, unable to have certainty. In the previous chapter we considered the pre-articulate understanding that is essential to Heidegger’s Dasein; in the next chapter we will see that unarticulated ‘prejudices’ form part of Gadamer’s description of understanding in the human sciences. Polanyi’s emphasis on the tacit roots of all knowledge have direct correlates with these characteristics in the work of Heidegger and Gadamer.

Perhaps the most commonplace example of tacit knowing is in the experience of recognising a physiognomy such as distinguishing a face in a crowd; while we know the face well and we also know that we know, we cannot define exactly how we know. Similarly in the descriptive sciences, the recognition of classes of entities, which cannot be precisely defined, is only learnt by practice from those who already know, and this knowledge cannot be completely specified or formalised. Identification of diseases or plants or animals or rock specimens are all examples Polanyi cites:21 while such physiognomies can be taught by demonstration, an essential element is the learner’s active participation in attempting to discern the meaning of the demonstration. In fact, in defining any word that denotes a physical thing, it is ultimately necessary to point at the thing itself, and any such ostensive definition fails to describe fully the meaning, reliant as it is on the learner to discover that which cannot be specified.22 Such examples as these highlight both the inevitable tacit element of such knowing, as well as the active participation necessary on behalf of the learner. But the process of tacit knowing is not limited to recognising physiognomies and visual perception; it is also found in other attempts at practical knowledge or understanding such as learning skills and using tools; Polanyi cites examples of these such as learning to ride a bicycle or mastering the use of a scalpel or a hammer—the latter being an example that Heidegger too uses to illustrate that sort of practical but unarticulated knowledge about how to get on in the world of the ready-to-hand in which we find ourselves.

In all cases of tacit knowing including those above there is a similar structure or relationship between two terms. The first term consists of the particulars of which we are only subsidiarily aware while the second term is the focus of our attention. So, there is a functional relationship between the two terms: the first term is known only tacitly and only as we rely on our awareness of it in order to attend to the second term:23 we focus on the familiar face while we know the particulars only subsidiarily; we focus on staying up on the bike not on the angle of imbalance and the radius of curvature; we concentrate on the hammer hitting the nail and not on the feel of its handle in the palm of the hand.

Many of Polanyi’s examples are of skills; to use Gilbert Ryle’s distinction, they involve knowing how as opposed to knowing that.24 But whether we talk of knowing how or knowing that, the structure of the tacit relationship is the same in both: all focal attention demands a subsidiary incorporation of tacit elements in order to focus on the whole. Another example, which is both a knowing how and a knowing that, is that of a blind person’s use of a stick to explore the world around them (an example that, as Zhenhua notes,25 both Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein use). This skill involves interpreting the shocks received by the hand holding the stick to give an awareness of the world at the end of the stick. While the focus is on knowledge of that world there is only a tacit awareness of the feeling and force of the stick on the muscles and nerves of the hand and arm.26 In this example and in all cases of using tools such as hammers or scalpels, as well as that of riding a bike, the subject effectively makes the stick or tool or bicycle an extension of their own body. In other words they shift outward the boundary between the taken-for-granted and the critically examined. And if we attempt

23. Ibid., 10. Italics added.
to critically examine the nerve sensations in our hand when using a cane or a scalpel or a hammer or when we are bike-riding then we do so to the detriment of the skill. Similarly if we focus on the minute particulars of a face or of a word in a sentence then we inevitably lose the meaning of the whole by focussing on its parts; only by throwing ourselves into the ‘whole’ do the tacit parts in which we dwell make sense. In Dorothy Emmet’s words, “there is always the personal involvement of the thinker, judging, probing, following clues in the penumbra of unspecified ‘tacit’ awareness which surrounds anything we are concentrating on in ‘focal’ awareness.”

It is important to note that this structure of tacit knowing does not depend on whether or not it is possible for the subject to consciously turn their focal attention on the hitherto subsidiary elements, for while they may have the possibility of focussing on some particulars, there is a point at which they cannot know any more of the process going on in their own body. So the tacit dimension includes both the necessarily tacit and the accidently tacit; while the latter can become the focus of deliberate attention, the former is forever inexplicitly known. For example, while we may focus on the sensations of bike-riding, or of using a tool, or the particulars of a face or rock specimen, or the data that lead to a ‘Eureka’ moment in science, we cannot know how our mind, starting with our intention to make sense of what we see or feel, integrates such particulars into the skilled action or judgment or discovery in question. We simply know more than we can tell, and in order to do so we are forced to assimilate uncritically, as part of our own experience, our knowledge of the tools or the words or the skills or the data that we take up in order that we might use them as means to other ends.

For the purposes of highlighting the unavoidability of a tacit dimension in all knowing, Polanyi offers evidence of tacit knowledge that is subliminal. He presents extensive examples from controlled experiments into what psychologists have called ‘subception’. One such experiment involves a subject being exposed to a string of nonsensical syllables some of which are consistently accompanied by an electric shock.

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The result of the experiment is that the subject learns to anticipate the shock at the sight of the ‘shock syllables’ but is unable to identify the actual syllables. “He had acquired a knowledge similar to that which we have when we know a person by signs which we cannot tell.”28 The advantage of such an experimental arrangement is that the division of roles between subject and observer eliminates the suspicion of self-contradiction, which is present when someone says they know something of which they cannot tell.29 It is also to such experiments that Polanyi points as evidence that tacit knowing represents a mental process which involves the integration of various particulars into a whole that is more than the formal sum of its known parts.30 The structure of the tacit integration is the same, says Polanyi, in all the various examples of tacit knowing that he expounds: “the learning of skills, the recognition of physiognomies, the mastery of tests, the use of tools, the uttering of speech, and the act of visual perception.”31

Polanyi’s views at this point draw on the insights into perception of Gestalt psychology,32 which showed that seeing an object occurs through a process of supplying a form that harmonises various perceptions into a meaningful whole and that seeing the complete form can occur even when this involves a mental completion of an incomplete pattern. Optical illusions are typically based on this fact and even if the observer knows of the absence of some of the parts of a picture it is still hard not to ‘see’ them. But Polanyi is dissatisfied with the mechanical explanation of the Gestaltists in terms of an equilibration of forces in the nervous system because such an explanation “leaves no place for any intentional effort which prompts our perception to explore and assess in the quest of knowledge the clues offered to our senses.”33 Rather, he sees the Gestalt phenomenon as “the outcome of an active shaping of experience performed in

29. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 97-98.
the pursuit of knowledge,” 34 and he holds that this shaping or integrating is “the great and indispensable tacit power by which all knowledge is discovered and, once discovered, is held to be true.” 35

Polanyi calls the two terms in the structure of tacit knowing the proximal and the distal, corresponding to the particulars and the whole, the first of which we often have only tacit knowledge of, and of which we are subsidiarily aware: “Such is the functional relation between the two terms of tacit knowing: we know the first term only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second.” Thus he describes it as a from-to awareness: “In an act of tacit knowing we attend from something for attending to something else; namely, from the first term to the second term of the tacit relation.” 36 So we attend to the integrated whole by relying on the subsidiary particulars, and so, he says, “we may call ‘knowing by attending to’ a focal knowing, and ‘knowing by relying on’ a subsidiary knowing.” 37

What is common to all such knowing is that we focus not on the proximal particulars of which we are only subsidiarily aware but on the distal whole object that we claim knowledge of. This focussing is an intentional act of the knowing mind to ‘indwell’ the clues presented to it, and, if we so choose, we can lose the meaning of the whole by turning our focus on the clues themselves. This indwelling our subsidiary awareness is necessary if we are to come to an understanding of the whole. To put it in more familiar terms, the background knowledge, beliefs, or understanding—including Heidegger’s primordial understanding and, as we will see, what Gadamer calls our prejudices—that we bring to a situation is the unquestioned foundation for making meaning of any data we are confronted with. If we wish to question the foundation, we can only do so by taking something else as foundational: in terms of Neurath’s familiar metaphor, while we may need to rebuild the raft at sea we cannot do so from scratch.

34. Polanyi, Tacit Dimension, 6.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 10.
It should be noted that there are a number of distinct aspects of knowing that Polanyi describes as tacit. Two have already been seen above: essential to the structure of knowing is a double inherent unspecifiability, one regarding the particulars and the second regarding the inferential process at work. With respect to the particulars, while we know we can recognise a familiar face or, if we are expert, a rock specimen or an x-ray of a diseased lung, it is not possible to specify all the particulars in which we dwell that contribute to the constitution of the meaningful whole.\textsuperscript{38} We may identify some particulars (while others remain unidentified), but even those identified become the focus of an awareness that depends in its turn on other subsidiary elements from which we focus in other acts of tacit integration that see the particular in question as a meaningful whole. Secondly, it is not even theoretically possible to specify the processes of integration—the ‘tacit inference’\textsuperscript{39}—required to arrive at the whole from our indwelling of any set of particulars. Also present is a third tacit aspect, already alluded to, but to which we will return, which consists in the enigma, which lies at the heart of discovery, of the process of knowing a good problem.

### 4.2 Personal and fiduciary

In the description of tacit knowing above, the active, although not necessarily conscious, will of the knower is apparent and it is this deliberate, invested and often passionate element, at the core of Polanyi’s view of knowledge, that is one pole of the unorthodox juxtaposition captured in his term *personal knowledge*—the other pole being the universal intent of human beliefs. Turning first to the personal term of the juxtaposition, we see that in the way he speaks of the personal Polanyi makes a clear distinction between personal and subjective. For him, the subjective has an element of arbitrariness, unconstrained as it is by ‘external’ factors. On the other hand, ‘personal’ captures the agency that enters into our knowing but which is constrained by a robust understanding of truth and hence the universal intent that all claims to knowledge imply. Polanyi says, “In so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged

\textsuperscript{38} Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*, 61.
\textsuperscript{39} Polanyi, “The Logic of Tacit Inference.”
by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action guided by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective.”

Polanyi describes the personal responsibility involved in searching for and finding the solution to a problem. Given that the solution of an unsolved problem is as yet indeterminate, so too, the decisions of the problem-solver “in casting around for a solution are necessarily indeterminate, … but his decisions are also responsible in being subject to the obligation to seek the predetermined solution of his problem.” So, Polanyi says, all problem solving is like that of the scientific search for truth, in that there exists “a commitment to the anticipation of a hidden reality,” which is revealed in the solution. This commitment is, as we will see, a fiduciary one and it involves the dual aspects of personal responsibility and of truth: “the act of judgment is its personal pole and the independent reality on which it bears is its external pole.” And, “since a problem can be known only tacitly, our knowledge of it can be recognized as valid only by accepting the validity of tacit knowing.”

It is now clear that Polanyi places a crucial importance on the purposiveness of the human agent; it is this element of agency that makes perception and all forms of knowledge a purposive act rather than a caused event. Polanyi’s contention is that “all the factors entering into our perceptions function as subsidiary clues to integrations that we make (not as causes of what we find to be given us in perception),” and that this is so even in cases of subception when these factors are entirely subliminal. Hence the use of ‘personal’ in Polanyi’s description of knowing as personal knowledge is a reference to the human agency intrinsic to any act of knowing, one aspect of which is the deliberate effort essential for making the tacit integration required to understand our perceptions or observations. To deny the personal element of knowledge, with its purposive, integrative, and fiduciary elements is to deny the possibility of making truth

42. Ibid.
claims. Prosch captures well the importance of the purposive intent involved in knowing, even at the tacit level, that distinguishes knowing from mere conditioning:

If the factors in perception that lie entirely below the level of any possible focal awareness are not factors of which we are at least subsidiarily aware, then perception is not a single, purposive act—it is at bottom merely a caused event—and what we call “knowledge,” being rooted in our perceptions, is then not a result of our purposeful efforts. But if knowledge is not a result of our purposeful efforts, then of course it could not have the quality of being either right or wrong, except by some standards external to it. It must intend to be right, in order ever to be mistaken. If perception and knowledge were not intentional acts, then truth could not be understood to be an ideal toward which we really aspire.

Rather, ‘truth’ would, in a Rortian way, be simply a word for whatever we are conditioned to think. But, says Polanyi, “there can be no way of aiming at the truth unless you believe in it. And furthermore there is no purpose in arguing with others unless you believe that they also believe in the truth and are seeking it. Only in the supposition that most people are disposed towards truth essentially as you are yourself is there any sense in opening yourself up to them in fairness and tolerance.”

Polanyi describes the scientist searching for a truth that is universal and unambiguous while at the same time knowing that such an ideal is “impossible and, indeed, strictly speaking, meaningless.” At this point Polanyi’s tacit ontological assumptions do him a disservice in not being better explicated; while he recognises that a final, explicit, unambiguous statement of truth is a meaningless ideal, he continues by offering reasons for thinking that while such an ideal is impossible to achieve it is by no means meaningless. He says, rightly, that “in science just as in the jury-box or in the voting-booth or in the recruiting office, you must commit yourself on grounds which, on reflection, must necessarily appear deficient. In science, as elsewhere, we must choose, within the limits of time and other given circumstances, whether to affirm or to refrain from affirming and what to say and how to say it.” But his description remains at the epistemological level, dealing with the constraints imposed by cultural and historical situatedness and the impossibility of achieving Putnam’s God’s-Eye View,

44. Ibid., 61.
45. Polanyi, Science, Faith and Society, 70.
referred to in previous chapters, rather than articulating the ontology of human indwelling the world, which in fact makes the ideal a meaningless one. So, while Polanyi rightly points to all the personal elements involved in knowing, including the knower’s cultural and historical situatedness, he only assumes, without explicating it, a deeper ontology. The following passage captures the constraints imposed on human knowing that make the ideal of objectivity impossible, but such descriptions, by correctly raising the ubiquitous practical problems of knowing, imply that the ideal is nevertheless meaningful, rather than inherently meaningless because ontologically the ideal of separating the human subject and the object of knowledge is incoherent.

Whatever our decision, it will fulfil our whole obligation if we have previously exhausted, within the limits imposed by the situation, the requirements of our ideal as interpreted by our conscience. All that can be required of us is that we should seek the universal in the light of such guidance as we possess. It is not required of us that we should decide our problems on the supposition that we were born in no particular place, in no particular time, and endowed with no personal judgment of our own. The fellow in the old joke who tells you, when you ask your way, that “he would not start from there” is talking logical nonsense. Our duty is always here and now; and mercifully that is all that is demanded of us. If we had been born among Azande, we would have Zande problems; as it is we have our own, which include, as they do not include for Azande, the pursuit of science.

I will return to further discussion of Polanyi’s ontology after commenting on the implications that the personal element of knowing has for method and after outlining more of his understanding of universal intent.

In science, and indeed in any field that would wish to have clear rules for arriving at truth, the personal and the tacit stand against a search for a definitive method. For Polanyi, the implication of the tacit elements involved is that the tacit inference, based as it is on personal judgment, replaces rules of method. Instead of rules, Polanyi speaks of the maxims of science—principles such as beauty or simplicity for example—that are ultimately unspecifiable and which, when the inescapable personal agency and tacit elements are recognised, replace the much sought-after rules of the so-called scientific method. So, says Polanyi, the foundational beliefs that are embedded in science and make it possible “are not derived by any

47. Ibid., 34.
definite rule from the data of experience, and … they can neither be verified nor falsified by experience according to any definite rule. Discovery, verification and falsification proceed according to certain maxims which cannot be precisely formulated and still less proved or disproved, and the application of which relies in every case on a personal judgment exercised (or accredited) by ourselves. These maxims and the art of interpreting them may be said to constitute the premisses of science, but I prefer to call them our scientific beliefs.”

One result of not being able to rely on strict rules is that all knowers must acknowledge the personal responsibility inherent in any claim to know. It is this responsibility which introduces the element of trust that Polanyi points to by speaking of the fiduciary element in all knowing, drawing on a term generally used in legal contexts to describe a relationship of trust between parties. Polanyi’s view—and central to HUFPaT—is that any claim to know is one made by a human agent entrusting themselves to the truth of what is asserted as well as to the matrix of presuppositions, authorities, and traditions out of which a specific claim arises. Claims to know entail varying but always present responsibility, says Polanyi: “A doctor deciding on a serious diagnosis in a difficult case or a juryman bringing in a fatal verdict in dubious circumstances will feel the weight of a heavy personal responsibility. In routine observations, unobstructed by opposition and unworried by doubts, these passions are dormant but not absent; no sincere assertion of fact is essentially unaccompanied by … a sense of personal responsibility.” This responsibility, captured by ‘fiduciary’, is inherent in the logic of belief: to assert something is to commit oneself to it, and to say ‘I believe …’ in good faith is to engage in a speech-act of investing oneself in a particular view of how things are; it is also to ask others to trust one’s integrity in staking a claim. While ‘snow is white’ written on a whiteboard may serve multiple


50. In his work after Personal Knowledge Polanyi moves away from his use of ‘fiduciary’ and says that he has reduced his “reliance on the necessity of commitment … by working out the structure of tacit knowing” (Polanyi, Tacit Dimension, x.). I believe that to neglect the role of personal commitment and the fiduciary nature of knowing results in a failure to adequately describe essential aspects of knowing.

51. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 27.
purposes, when I personally assert that ‘snow is white’ I do more than state a proposition for discussion: I make a truth claim and commit myself (to a greater or lesser degree of provisionality) to its veracity, and I ask you to trust me enough to consider that my claim may be true. “It follows,” says Polanyi, “that the words ‘I believe’ in the assertion ‘I believe p’ must not be taken to form [simply] a declaratory sentence … They are more in the nature of an exclamation like ‘By Jove!’ or thumping on the table; they seal a commitment, a vouching or asseveration.”

So, for Polanyi, there is no such thing as an impersonal allegation because every assertion is made in the fiduciary mode which reflects the particularity of a person who voices or writes or accepts, at a particular time and place, that such is the case, and, in doing so, commits a fiduciary act. Polanyi explains that there is a difference between such fiduciary acts of personal commitment and the contradiction in terms involved in the idea of a declaratory statement—a ‘self-speaking’ sentence—that is not declared by a person to be true:

So long as we ascribed to declaratory sentences the properties of being true or false, we had to account for these properties in the same sense as we would explain what makes green leaves green. Such self-speaking sentences appeared to possess the quality of being true or false impersonally, and this would have to be accounted for again in terms of impersonal criteria: which is of course impossible. We might have a better chance of achieving the purpose of epistemological reflection if we asked ourselves instead why we do believe certain statements of fact, or why we believe certain classes of statements, such as those of science. For having recognized that an ‘impersonal allegation’ is a contradiction in terms—just as an ‘anonymous cheque’ would be—we shall no longer try to arrive at any justification of our allegations which would not in its turn be composed of personal allegations of our own.  

The result of this inevitable fiduciary element is that while I may be able to justify my beliefs, scientific or otherwise, I can only do so in terms of other things that I, personally, believe. The spectre of some sort of relativism or subjectivism (to which we will return in chapter 6) is clear; Polanyi says, “It will be objected that ‘You can believe what you like’,” raising the “paradox of self-set standards; if the criteria of reasonableness, to which I subject my own beliefs, are ultimately upheld by my confidence in them, the whole process of justifying such beliefs may appear but a futile

52. Ibid., 29.
53. Ibid., 256.
authorization of my own authority.” But, he says, if this is the reality of human knowing, then it must be accepted that there is no inconsistency in his description. And the decision to accept such a description of Polanyi’s fiduciary mode, and in fact his wider views, as well as the argument of this thesis, is a case in point:

The decision to do so must be admitted to be itself in the nature of a fiduciary act. Indeed, the same must apply to the whole of this enquiry and to all conceivable conclusions to be derived from it. While I shall continue to argue a series of points and adduce evidence for my proposed conclusions, I shall always wish it to be understood that in the last resort my statements affirm my personal beliefs, arrived at by the considerations given in the text in conjunction with other not specifiable motives of my own. Nothing that I shall say should claim the kind of objectivity to which in my belief no reasoning should ever aspire; namely that it proceeds by a strict process, the acceptance of which by the expositor, and his recommendation of which for acceptance by others, include no passionate impulse of his own.

So, says Polanyi, science and by implication, all knowledge claims (including the claims of this thesis), “can never be more than an affirmation of certain things we believe in. These beliefs must be adopted responsibly, with due consideration of the evidence and with a view to universal validity. But eventually they are ultimate commitments, issued under the seal of our personal judgment.” Ultimately, he says, “we shall find ourselves with no other answer to queries than to say ‘because I believe so.’ That is what no set of rules, or any model of science based on a system of rules, can do; it cannot say ‘because I believe so.’ Only a person can believe something, and only I myself can hold my own beliefs. For the holding of these I must bear the ultimate responsibility; it is futile, and I think also ignoble, to hunt for systems and machines which will take that burden from me”—things which include, I would add, what Gadamer calls ‘method’.

This discussion of Polanyi so far has emphasised the personal and fiduciary elements of affirmations of truth and the impossibility of a rigorous method that would eliminate the provisionality of knowledge claims. The other pole, to which I now turn is the universal validity of such affirmations.

54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
4.3 Truth, realism, and universal intent

In the light of his doing away with objectivity as normally understood (the disengaged human observer of an ‘external’ world, knowledge of which can be summed up in propositions), the discussion above raises the question of how Polanyi understands truth and reality and what he means by ‘universal validity’. While he maintains a conviction about the ubiquitous presence of the personal and fiduciary element in all knowing, Polanyi claims that this is held in constant tension with a realist position with respect to ontology; as we will see, this commitment to the mind-independence of the world allows Polanyi to speak of the universal intent of our claims. I will return to problems raised by such issues further when considering relativism in the final chapter, but, to anticipate, and with various qualifications to be discussed there, perhaps we might characterise Polanyi as an ontological realist and an epistemic relativist in order to capture the distinctive nature of his position.

Polanyi deals with the difficulty of defining the real or reality by turning to a pragmatic definition: for him, the reality of an ‘external world’, independent of the human knower and impinging on us, is, on the one hand, simply unquestioned (he enters into no arguments with solipsism or idealism), while on the other hand our grasp of this external world is always provisional. (And further, as we will see shortly, it is a world we relate to by ‘indwelling’ it.) So, to attribute reality to a scientific discovery, Polanyi says, “is to believe that it refers to no chance configuration of things, but to a persistent connection of certain features, a connection which, being real, will yet manifest itself in numberless ways, inexhaustibly. It is to believe that it is there, existing independently of us, and that for that reason its consequences can never be fully predicted.”57

Assertions about reality, which is capable of manifesting itself indefinitely into the future, are believed with fiduciary conviction but held to be universally true; hence they are neither subjectivist nor conventionalist nor objectivist; as knowers or discoverers we carry the responsibility for the pursuit of hidden truth. When we claim to

know something, we claim that, in our judgment, we have made personal contact with reality and this claim is equivalent to a statement of belief in that reality. Thus, while our belief is personal, involving our conviction and our own personality, and while it may also be solitary, it is neither subjective nor self-indulgent. This, then, is the sense that Polanyi uses the term *universal intent* to describe this orientation that points from personal fiduciary conviction to the reality that exists independently of our conviction about it.  

However, in this description of the personal, I suggest that Polanyi does not go far enough towards recognising the hermeneutic level of mutual engagement (and indeed, constitution) between the nature of the ‘known’ and the knower’s personal characteristics and manner or stance of engagement. A thoroughly hermeneutic approach, which encompasses ontological (as well as epistemic) dimensions seen in the previous chapter’s outline of aspects of Heidegger’s thinking, warns against falling into thinking of an ‘I’ separated from the world known. I will return to these ontological aspects and implications of Polanyi’s thinking at the end of this chapter after dealing further with epistemic issues.

To believe something with universal intent is also, for Polanyi, indicative of the fact that not only do I believe my account of reality to be true but that I also believe that anyone else who looks from where I look and who comes equipped as I do, will accept the same account of reality. But to speak of universal intent is not the same as claiming ‘universal truth’ or an “established universality”; there is no guaranteed method of verification or means of proving the truth, for Polanyi readily acknowledges both the possibility of my or our vision being wrong and also that even unanimity of belief is no guarantee of its inerrancy. A particular example, which also serves as an analogy, is that of a group of people at the seaside peering through rain and haze to make out whether the blotches on the horizon are in fact a ship. One person may claim knowledge in the affirmative while others disagree, but as the first describes the parts of the whole, others too may recognise that it is indeed a ship. Yet still there is no proof, no irrefutable or

explicit signs that determine the matter, and each one’s belief that their conception is in accord with reality is a provisional and fiduciary judgment. Due to its ineliminable tacit elements, which (along with the ontological dimension that Polanyi does not adequately describe) makes articulation complex and ultimately incomplete, this conviction cannot aspire to be certain or objective or impersonal knowledge. 60 “Thus,” says Polanyi, “while we recognize that true propositions cannot be established by any explicit criteria, we do assert the universal validity of propositions to which we personally assent. Therein is expressed our conviction that truth is real and cannot fail to be recognized by all who sincerely seek it.” 61

Because our convictions are just that—our own sincere convictions, held with universal intent—and because there is no other coherent conception of knowing, Polanyi is attempting a redefinition of the concept of knowledge. To situate this in the light of the discussion earlier, Polanyi refuses to accept the definition of scientific knowledge in particular as certain, objective, and wholly explicit, which arose substantially out of the debates at the genesis of experimental science, including the Cartesian quest for certainty, and in the philosophy of logical positivism of the twentieth century. Knowledge can only be that which we provisionally judge with personal conviction and universal intent to be true, and always includes a primordial tacit dimension; it is incoherent to talk of knowledge in any other sense. As Prosch sums up:

There is no purely objective knowledge, because nothing can be called knowledge that is not personally accredited as knowledge. Facts do not force themselves upon us. What we call ‘facts’ always involve our judgment (with some degree of risk) that something is a fact. What is acknowledged as a fact is, of course, something in which we must believe. But it is so acknowledged because we first do, in fact, believe it. Polanyi claimed that St. Augustine was right, therefore, to say that he believes in order that he may know. Polanyi held, however, that this is true for all sorts of knowledge—the scientific included—not just for religious knowledge. In a different way, subjective knowledge would also be a contradiction in terms. The purely subjective has reference only to the person involved. It lacks universal intent and is known to do so. 62

60. Ibid., 77-78. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 266-268. Prosch, Michael Polanyi: A Critical Exposition, 97.
61. Polanyi, Science, Faith and Society, 73.
4.4 Discovery

Having examined some of the essential elements of Polanyi’s view of knowing, it is now possible to turn to the key problem in understanding science, as well as all less formalised knowing: the most striking example of tacit knowing is that of the process of discovery. At the heart of discovery lies the ‘learner’s paradox’, first expounded in Plato’s _Meno_, of knowing a good problem. The paradox is put by Meno to Socrates as follows: “On what lines will you look, Socrates, for a thing of whose nature you know nothing at all? Pray, what sort of thing, amongst those that you know not, will you treat us to as the object of your search? Or even supposing, at the best, that you hit upon it, how will you know it is the thing you did not know?” Polanyi elaborates: “To see a problem is to see something that is hidden; it is to have an intimation of the coherence of hitherto not comprehended particulars”; the problem is a good one if this intimation is true, and, “it is original if no one else can see the possibilities of the comprehension that we are anticipating.” Furthermore, “to see a problem that will lead to a great discovery is not just to see something hidden, but to see something of which the rest of humanity cannot have even an inkling.” The paradox suggests that the search for the solution of any problem involves an apparent absurdity, for if on the one hand one knows what one is looking for then there is no problem, but if on the other hand one does not know the solution then it will not be recognised when it is found. While Polanyi did not express himself in the language of hermeneutics and its famous circle, there is a patent parallel with Heidegger’s, already quoted, “any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted.” For Polanyi, what the _Meno_ shows conclusively is that “if all knowledge is explicit, i.e., capable of being clearly stated, then we cannot know a problem or look for its solution. And the _Meno_ also shows, therefore, that if problems nevertheless exist, and discoveries


64. Polanyi, _Tacit Dimension_, 21-22. Polanyi, might more accurately have described originality as the _independent_ recognition of the possibilities of the comprehension anticipated. Hence those cases where the same discovery is made independently are validly applauded as original.

can be made by solving them, we can know things, and important things, that we cannot
tell.”

Rejecting Plato’s resolution of the paradox which appeals to *anamnesis*, a
remembrance of past lives, as the essence of discovery, Polanyi insists that the scientist
is led by an intuitive insight into the nature of reality, a tacit knowledge, undefinable yet
carrying conviction enough to drive the pursuit of truth, even, perhaps, at great cost to
the scientist. While it is not a popular view that holds that “the scientist is guided
especially by a vague sense of still unrevealed facts,” Polanyi says, “potential
discovery may be thought to attract the mind which will reveal it—inflaming the
scientist with creative desire and imparting to him a foreknowledge of itself; guiding
him from clue to clue and from surmise to surmise. The testing hand, the straining eye,
the ransacked brain, may be thought to be all labouring under the common spell of a
potential discovery striving to emerge into actuality.” Good scientists, therefore, are
those whose intuitive insights allow them both to recognise a good problem and to
perform the tacit integration necessary to solving it. In support of this view Polanyi
offers examples of scientists such as Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, De Broglie,
Heisenberg, and Dirac, all of whom made surprising discoveries on the grounds of
observations that had been known for some time.

Having concluded this outline of Polanyi’s view of knowing, and before looking
at his ontology, it is pertinent to point out the complementarity of his view and that of
others who highlight the epistemological significance of the social dimensions of
knowledge.

4.5 The social dimension

So far, we have seen that, for Polanyi, human knowing, including scientific
discovery, is similar to ordinary perception in that it involves a personal act of

69. Ibid., 28.
integration which arises out of indwelling innumerable elements of which we are not focally aware, some of which are identifiable and some of which are not. Out of this indwelling, the human knower arrives at an understanding of a coherent whole of which the knower too is a part. The truth of the knower’s understanding is believed, and may be explicitly asserted—although never without remainder—with universal intent. In the case of science in particular, such assertions consist in fiduciary claims to have established “hitherto unknown coherences in nature.”

While much of Polanyi’s description of knowing and discovery as outlined above could be seen as an individual pursuit disconnected from the social milieu in which all people, scientists included, find themselves, this view would not be correct: Polanyi also recognises the social dimensions of science and all knowledge production. In fact, as Nye makes clear in *Michael Polanyi and His Generation: Origins of the Social Construction of Science*, Polanyi was one of a group of contemporaries including Robert Merton, Ludwik Fleck, J. D. Bernal, and Karl Mannheim at the centre of recognising the societal elements crucial to science. Nye says that Polanyi was one of the leading protagonists in the debates at the origins of “this new social conception of science,” the roots of which “are to be found in the scientific culture and political events of Europe in the 1930s, when scientific intellectuals struggled to defend the universal status of scientific knowledge and to justify public support for science in an era of economic catastrophe, the rise of Stalinism and Fascism, and increasing demands from governments for applications of science to industry and social welfare.”

These social aspects of scientific knowledge production, which were taken up and popularised by Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, represent a ‘social turn’ in understanding science, which was carried to antirealist extremes by those such

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72. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. I emphasise ‘deemed’ because, as previously noted, there is some question of how much Kuhn drew on the work of Polanyi. See, for example, Jacobs, “Michael Polanyi and Thomas Kuhn: Priority and Credit.”; Moleski, “Polanyi Vs. Kuhn: Worldviews Apart.”
as Latour, Feyerabend, and others as they adopted a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ that went further than the Polanyian or Kuhnian generations in uncovering the power interests at play in the ‘social construction of knowledge’. Although Polanyi’s description of the ‘republic of science’ consisting in the web of trust that makes up scientific practice does not extend as far as anticipating the sociology of scientific knowledge and actor-network theory—fields within the philosophy of science—his views nevertheless respond proleptically to them. In addition, as Nye notes, Polanyi was somewhat negative about the sociology of his time for its deterministic and relativist tendencies.

The major vulnerabilities of Polanyi’s position lie in his lack of attention to the local and power dimensions intrinsic to scientific knowledge production, as well as with aspects of his ontology (to which we will turn in the next section). With respect to the relationship between knowledge and power, Polanyi might be described as naive in his confidence in the scientific establishment’s ability and noble commitment to arrive at truth. In order to go forward in the interpretive process and to understand better the social dimensions of the constitution of knowledge and to discern that which is real from the mass of constructs that make up our understanding of reality, it is necessary to go beyond the ambit of this thesis and to take Polanyi’s account of knowledge, as well as the insights of a Heideggerian ontology, and to combine their views with a thoroughgoing understanding of the social constitution of knowledge as it arises out of a milieu less noble than Polanyi imagines—a milieu rife with power plays and human interests. This comprehensive understanding, that listens to the claims of social constructivists such as Latour, for what light their hermeneutic of suspicion can throw on the enterprise of science, is another way of uncovering the ‘prejudices’ that Gadamer


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claims are ubiquitous and it points to the truth that “in the last analysis, all understanding is self-understanding.” Without this more critical understanding of the historical, cultural, and sociological factors in knowledge production, Polanyi could justifiably be accused (somewhat anachronistically) of naivety in his realism although not of the naive objectivism of positivist thinking. But if Polanyi were to contribute to the ‘science wars’ over realism and social constructivism, I suggest that his vision of science and critique of objectivism, although directed at a different target, would be little changed.

The weakness of positions such as those of Latour—and Rorty too in the sense that his pragmatism can be interpreted as a variation on social constructivism—is that while they do pay heed to the significant social entrenchment of all human knowledge, they nevertheless hold on to the objectivist ideal that Polanyi and philosophical hermeneutics rejects and in so doing they remain locked in a view of human knowledge that says that true knowledge is necessarily objective and impersonal. This leads, in the extreme, either to the self-contradictory conclusion of denying the possibility of speaking about anything, or to simply ignoring the question of reality altogether while at the same time propounding theories that depend on ontological foundations. In other words theories such as these don’t offer a way forward to the person who accepts their view that social factors play a significant part in knowledge production, but who wishes to move on to the epistemological question of whether there is a coherent justification for believing anything to be universally true.

However, in the face of those who emphasise the social production of knowledge but maintain objectivist expectations, Polanyi offers one such way forward; a way to maintain the common-sense belief in a reality that is a given of the universe, and at the same time to recognise the impossibility of achieving the Archimedean viewpoint necessary for objective, guaranteed knowledge. By highlighting the inevitable role of tacit knowing in all human beliefs and actions he offers a coherent but provisional justification for faith in our personal convictions about reality. If all of

knowing involves a tacit dimension then we may truly claim to know more than we can tell. And at this point the argument with the objectivist (of either the optimistic, Hirschian, variety or the Rortian pessimist about robust truth) must draw to a close. By its very nature it will conclude with unprovable assertions about the world as one person or community sees it and while this assertion claims to be true and is made with universal intent—claiming to be a true account for all people—it can only avoid reflexive disintegration by denying that it is either objective or subjective; it is, like all knowledge claims, a personal belief held with universal intent, concerning the nature of human knowledge and the possibility of knowing the truth of a reality beyond human construction.

I turn now to what Polanyi does say about the social dimension of knowledge and science in particular.

For Polanyi, not only is the pursuit of scientific knowledge a personal one involving the fiduciary commitment of the individual who asserts or accepts a knowledge claim, but its fiduciary nature goes beyond the individual to the web of trust that scientists work within as they submit to the world of tradition and authorities in which they are immersed. Science is a pursuit taking place within a social context, which means that the social factors, on which the outcomes of science are totally dependent, need to be recognised in tandem with the personal factors. Polanyi’s ‘indwelling’ is not merely that of an isolated individual tacitly indwelling the data of experience; for him, the individual also indwells a social context, which in the case of science he calls ‘the republic of science’\(^78\) or a ‘society of explorers’\(^79\) or, emphasising the bonds of trust that hold it together, a ‘fiduciary framework’\(^80\). So, he says, “to accord validity to science—or to any other of the great domains of the mind—is to express a faith which can be upheld only within a community.”\(^81\)

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79. Polanyi, *Tacit Dimension*.
80. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 266.
In the context of his discussion of the maxims of science, Polanyi highlights both their sociocultural embeddedness as well as the community responsibility in promoting them. Of the former, he refers to a collective belief in unspecifiable foundations, which are “embodied in a tradition, the tradition of science.” He continues, “The continued existence of science is an expression of the fact that there exists a group of people (customarily described as scientists) who are agreed in accepting one tradition, and that they trust each other to be informed by this tradition. ... Holding, as I do, this conception of science and accepting science as true, I must call science a belief which I share.”82 Of the latter, Polanyi speaks of the shared responsibility of scientists, which arises from the tacit nature of their common commitments (an example he gives is that of resisting governments that would limit the freedom of scientists to pursue truth wherever it might lead): “We, as a community, must face the fact that there is no system of necessary rules which will relieve us from the responsibility of holding the constitutive beliefs of our group or of teaching them to the next generation and defending their continued profession against those who would suppress them.”83

One aspect of the social embeddedness of scientific and all knowledge, for Polanyi, concerns what Peter Berger coined a ‘plausibility structure’, 84 which arises out of the taken-for-grantedness of the Husserlian ‘lifeworld’85 or John Searle’s ‘background’86 and described compellingly more recently by Taylor as the ‘modern social imaginary’.87 It is the plausibility structure that makes some things thinkable and meaningful and indeed seem inevitable, and which rules out others as simply unbelievable. In Taylor’s terms, the social imaginary is deeper than theorised intellectual schemes for examining social reality; it consists in “how people imagine

their social existence” including their expectations, as well as the often tacitly held and unclearly delineated “normative notions and images which underlie these expectations.”

So, says Taylor, “the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.”

Taylor describes this ‘tacit’ aspect of the social imaginary, which “can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines, because of its very unlimited and indefinite nature.”

In a discussion that invokes both Polanyi and Heidegger, Taylor asks whether in bringing the background to articulacy it does not lose its character of not being focal or explicit. He answers by pointing to the ultimate incoherence of such a view: “there must always be a context from which we are attending,” he says:

The background is what makes certain experiences intelligible to us. It makes us capable of grasping them, makes them understandable. So it can be represented as a kind of [implicit] understanding, or ‘pre-understanding’ in Heidegger’s term. To bring it to articulacy is to take (some of) this and make it explicit. But the reason for the two words in parentheses in my preceding sentence is that the idea of making the background completely explicit, of undoing its status as background, is incoherent in principle.

For Polanyi, in science, the tacit integrations and judgments involved at arriving at a vision of a coherent whole are made within this realm of what is seen as plausible (and akin to what Kuhn called the dominant paradigm):

“Current conceptions of science about the nature of things always affect our recognition of coherence in nature. From the sighting of a problem to the ultimate decision of rejecting still conceivable doubts, factors of plausibility are ever in our minds. This is what is meant by saying that, strictly speaking, all natural science is an expression of personal judgment.”

But this personal judgment is made within a context in which every individual is forced to rely on a network of thinkers—contemporaneous and historical—held together by a mutual recognition of, and submission to, the trustworthiness of others; no scientist

89. Ibid., 173.
90. Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, 69. Note: the original has “… a kind of explicit understanding, or ‘pre-understanding’…” which from the context is clearly a typographical error.
91. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 44. It is on page 44 of this work that Kuhn makes his one reference to Polanyi, saying, “Polanyi has brilliantly developed a very similar theme” (to Kuhn’s ‘paradigm’).
knows even a small fraction of the framework of knowledge on the validity of which their own contribution depends, and their calling involves “submission to the vast area of information and belief surrounding his selected field of inquiry.”

So, Polanyi says, fiduciary, provisional belief is “the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.” And once again, emphasising the provisional nature of this fiduciary commitment, he says, “While our acceptance of this framework is the condition for having any knowledge, this matrix can claim no self-evidence.”

Here, we see in Polanyi’s work what will be so important to Gadamer: that any claims to knowledge in the present are dependent on tradition and authority, and are imbued with presuppositions without which it is impossible to even begin thinking. From the beginning of an apprenticeship into science the pupil indwells a tradition, submitting to the authority of the teacher even while the subject matter initially lacks the meaning that comes with experience; quoting Augustine (and he Isaiah 7:9), Polanyi says “unless you believe, you shall not understand.”

And what is true of the novice also applies in different manner to the expert: even the eminent scientist relies on the authority of others as they use and assume knowledge from branches of science that are not their own.

Contributions to scientific journals, the gatekeepers of what is counted as credible science, will only be accepted if they fall within the bounds of plausibility, yet such grounds can never be explicitly defined and while they rule out some possibilities, they also allow room for innovation. Decisions to accept an academic paper or to take seriously a new scientific claim are, says Polanyi, “based on fundamental convictions

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96. Ibid., 64.
about the nature of things and about the method which is therefore likely to yield results of scientific merit. These beliefs and the art of scientific inquiry based on them are unable to be codified: they are, in the main, tacitly implied in the traditional pursuit of scientific enquiry.” ⁹⁷ So science as a whole is mediated by thousands of scientists unknown to the individual scientist who nevertheless accepts the body of science without challenge. ⁹⁸ Polanyi cites a case where a letter to the journal Nature proposed that the gestation period of various animals was an integer multiple of the number π. Despite ample evidence, such a proposal is out of the realms of plausibility to the biologist, and yet there is no means of specifying exactly why: “Our conception of the nature of things tells us that such a relationship is absurd, but cannot prescribe how one could prove this.” ⁹⁹ Notwithstanding this conformity to current conceptions of plausibility, science also admits discoveries that are surprising, although, says Polanyi, all arise from “pursuing possibilities suggested by existing knowledge.” So, for example, while Planck’s proposal of quantum theory in 1900 was a radical innovation that took eleven years to gain widespread acceptance, it was based on material available to other physicists of the time. ¹⁰⁰

Polanyi describes the scientist, immersed in the current body of accepted scientific thought, as finding themselves indwelling an aspect of reality of boundless profundity which may, he says, invoking his definition of the real, “manifest its truth inexhaustibly and often surprisingly in the future.” ¹⁰¹ This situation, he says, is like the case of our everyday experience of knowing, where we have a perspective of a solid object or a glimpse of another mind and know that there are unlimited undisclosed, maybe unthinkable, aspects of reality to be explored. While Polanyi does not make the explicit connection to texts, the interpretation of a text too, as we will see, allows of a boundless number of valid interpretations while still ruling out many more interpretations on the grounds of non-explicit canons of plausibility. We also hear

⁹⁷. Ibid.
⁹⁸. Ibid., 80.
⁹⁹. Ibid., 65.
¹⁰⁰. Ibid., 67.
¹⁰¹. Ibid., 69.
echoes in Polanyi’s description of reality, defined as much by future possibilities as concrete actuality, of Heidegger’s “higher than actuality stands possibility.”

According to Polanyi, it is the overall trustworthiness of the ‘society of explorers’ that makes up science, which explains how scientific knowledge can consist in a coherent and progressing whole. His appeal is to a ‘principle of mutual control’, which points to the way scientists “keep watch over one another” as each one is both critic and criticised in the conversation that leads to the formation of scientific opinion.

“Each scientist independently plays his part in maintaining scientific traditions over an immense domain of inquiry of which he knows virtually nothing. A society of explorers is controlled throughout by such mutually imposed authority, and while each scientist can only act with authority in their own field, there are ‘chains of overlapping neighbourhoods’ knit together by acknowledged maxims of plausibility that ensure that there is a ‘mediated consensus between scientists even if they cannot understand more than a vague outline of each other’s subjects.’ For the novice, there is no choice but to walk the Augustinian road, assuming that ‘current standards are essentially true and common throughout science. They trust the traditions fostered by this system of mutual control without much experience of it and at the same time claim an independent position from which they may reinterpret and possibly revolutionize this tradition.’ Whether novice or expert, each scientist contributes to the tradition of science by their own independent thinking and by their submission to both the body of science and to the reality that dictates the parameters of their own innovation. In a distinctly Kuhnian description Polanyi describes the dynamics of the reshaping of the body of science, including his own involvement:

Each exchange of mutual criticism is something of a tussle and may be a mortal struggle. New standards of plausibility and of scientific interest are thus initiated and eventually established. The movement will start in one field and gradually diffuse into all others. This is how science is steadily reshaped and yet its coherence maintained

102. Heidegger, Being and Time, 63.
103. Polanyi, Tacit Dimension, 72.
104. Ibid., 83.
105. Ibid., 72-73.
106. Ibid., 73.
over all its fields. I myself am involved in such a predicament today through my dissent from some methods of current psychology and sociology. But I do not challenge thereby the existence of science as a coherent system of thought: I merely press for its reform in certain respects.\textsuperscript{107}

With this integration of the role of the individual in the community that makes up the ‘republic of science’ it is possible to admit science to be a true reflection of reality while at the same time recognising both the importance of individual judgment and the fact of its production in a social and cultural network of which the individual is always already a part. The proper epistemological question of science and all knowledge is not then, “How can I know, objectively and impersonally, what is true?”—for the answer is always “I can’t.” Based on a Polanyian epistemology the only coherent question is and has always been: “Which socially entrenched knowledge claims do I personally believe to be, and provisionally accredit as, a true account of reality?” So, according to Polanyi (and with a caveat concerning his emphasis on the independent and sovereign knowing ‘I’, to which I return shortly) it is possible to coherently assert those things I am confident of in my everyday knowledge of the world and also to trust that the scientific enterprise leads to truth about the real world. On the basis of Polanyi’s explication of personal knowledge it is possible to assert this much with confidence: that scientific and all human knowing consists in individual beliefs, held with universal intent and dependent on and produced in a social setting of which I am inextricably a part; that while no proofs are possible, there is a world independent of my own thinking about it and that some assertions are true, some false; that all knowledge is personal knowledge not distinguished from beliefs by a spurious knowledge/belief dichotomy; and that it is possible as a human being to act on my personal beliefs, despite their provisionality, without the reflexive disintegration inherent in any view premised on an objectivist ideal of knowledge.

At this point it is worth reiterating that part of the reason for considering Polanyi in this thesis is to challenge the view that science provides explicit and methodologically guaranteed access to the one truth. This is a view that is paralleled by the argument of Hirsch and others that there is one fixed meaning to a text, which lies in

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 74.
the discovery of the authorial intent. But on Polanyi’s description of science, while
science uncovers truth about the real world independent of anyone’s thinking about it, it
firstly lacks an explicit methodology and, secondly, the truth remains both provisional
and ever open to more and deeper understandings. So, for those like Hirsch and Betti
who want to appeal to a single meaning, if only as an ideal, even the natural sciences do
not serve as allies in that quest. Nevertheless, science advances in its provisional way,
but this provisionality and open-endedness does not entail a fall into relativism, as I will
elaborate more in chapter 6.

I turn now to the issue of the ontological dimensions in Polanyi’s thinking, my
concerns about which I have alluded to a number of times in the description of his
epistemology above.

4.6 Beyond epistemology: A Polanyian ontology?

While the consideration of Polanyi’s work above makes it clear that his concern
is primarily epistemological, his exposition also entails ontology. So, in the light of
discussion in this thesis (principally in the previous chapter) of the ontological nature of
philosophical hermeneutics as well as its inevitable entailments for epistemology, it is
appropriate to ask about the relationship between Polanyi’s epistemology and his
ontology: in what sense does Polanyi’s account of the structure of knowing depend on
particular understandings of being? In the preface to the 1964 edition of Personal
Knowledge Polanyi hints that his understanding of human knowing might demonstrate
or be dependent on a Heideggerian ontology and says that his “more concrete structure
of tacit knowing” is a reinterpretation of processes that existentialism and
phenomenology have studied under other names. He says: “All understanding is based
on our dwelling in the particulars of that which we comprehend. Such indwelling is a
participation of ours in the existence of that which we comprehend; it is Heidegger’s
being-in-the-world. … Indwelling is being-in-the-world. Every act of tacit knowing
shifts our existence, re-directing, contracting our participation in the world.”108

Hubert Dreyfus points out this similarity between Heidegger’s ‘being-in’ and Polanyi’s ‘indwelling’ noting that the model of subject and object does not describe the relation between the knower and the world that is indwelt: “What Heidegger is getting at is a mode of being-in we might call ‘inhabiting.’ When we inhabit something, it is no longer an object for us but becomes part of us and pervades our relation to other objects in the world. Both Heidegger and Michael Polanyi call this way of being-in ‘dwelling.’ Polanyi points out that we dwell in our language; we feel at home in it and relate to objects and other people through it. Heidegger says the same for the world. Dwelling is Dasein’s basic way of being-in-the-world.”

This connection with Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world, while only named explicitly in the preface to a later edition of Personal Knowledge, is concretely seen in Polanyi’s description of the indwelling of physical tools as they are taken up in our own bodies, but also extends to our indwelling of the social world and our own lifeworld, including, as Dreyfus notes, our language. For him, while he still speaks of an ‘external world’ in a manner that Heidegger does not, the boundary between the knower and what is external is dynamic and indistinct because the knower takes up into themselves the apparatus of cognition in a way most easily exemplified by the use of tools: we, as knowers, incorporate our subsidiary awareness of such apparatus in the same way we do our awareness of our own bodies. Externality, Polanyi says, “is clearly defined only if we can examine an external object deliberately, localizing it clearly in space outside.”

But when we use tools or probes they are incorporated into our subsidiary or tacit awareness and by doing so we engage in “the act of making them form a part of our own body.” In so doing, we move the boundary between our self and what is understood as external to the self:

The way we use a hammer or a blind man uses his stick, shows in fact that in both cases we shift outwards the points at which we make contact with the things that we observe as objects outside ourselves. While we rely on a tool or a probe, these are not handled as external objects. We may test the tool for its effectiveness or the probe for its suitability, e.g. in discovering the hidden details of a cavity, but the tool and the probe can never lie


110. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 59.
in the field of these operations; *they remain necessarily on our side of it, forming part of ourselves, the operating persons. We pour ourselves out into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. We accept them existentially by dwelling in them.*

So, says Polanyi, (in a way reminiscent of Heidegger’s view, elaborated in the previous chapter, that the boundary between meaning and meaninglessness is that between Dasein as Being-in-the-world and what is not incorporated into the world) “an external thing is given a meaning by being made to form an extension of ourselves.” And, with respect to science, the framework of assumptions acts as an intellectual tool: it becomes indwelt, in a similar manner to Heidegger’s ready-to-hand understanding of equipment, but in this case it includes the cognitive equipment of science. Speaking of the tacit and ultimately inexplicit nature of the presuppositions of science as well as the degree to which we identify by becoming one with the framework within which we work, Polanyi says, that when we accept the presuppositions necessary for any framework of interpretation, we “dwell in them as we do in our own body.”

Such frameworks may range from theories, through mathematical discoveries, to musical symphonies; but whatever they are, they function to give meaning only by our indwelling them uncritically. This uncritical acceptance of frameworks “consists in a process of assimilation by which we identify ourselves with them. Such frameworks are not asserted and cannot be asserted, for assertion can be made only within a framework with which we have identified ourselves for the time being; as they are themselves our ultimate framework, they are essentially inarticulable.” And, he says, it is only through this skilful adoption of the framework of science that experience can fall into a meaningful whole, which always bears the mark of the individual’s fiduciary commitment: “This making sense of experience,” he says, “is a skilful act which impresses the personal participation of the scientist on the resultant knowledge.”

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111. Ibid. Italics added.
114. Ibid.
115. Ibid., 195.
116. Ibid., 60.
Again, in parallel with Heidegger’s sense of giving oneself over to the world (which for Heidegger cannot be separated from the self that gives itself), Polanyi describes the self-commitment involved, whether in the physical use of a tool or the intellectual dependence on a belief system: “Like the tool, the sign or the symbol can be conceived as such only in the eyes of a person who relies on them to achieve or to signify something. This reliance is a personal commitment which is involved in all acts of intelligence by which we integrate some things subsidiarily to the centre of our focal attention. Every act of personal assimilation by which we make a thing form an extension of ourselves through our subsidiary awareness of it, is a commitment of ourselves; a manner of disposing of ourselves.”

Polanyi describes this sense of indwelling as utilising a framework to unfold or understand in a way that is necessarily “in accordance with the indications and standards imposed by the framework” as a form of mental existence, and if we are forced by our knowing acts to change the framework or choose an alternative framework then such a move results in “a change in our way of being.” And, like any act of knowing, even the radical ones that involve a modification of an existent framework or the adoption of another framework are made with universal intent—the belief that the new or modified framework is a better approximation to how things are.

Polanyi’s language has similarly strong ontological implications when he speaks of the “intentional change of being” involved in the art of knowing seen in exercising skills or connoisseurship, which is constituted by “the pouring of ourselves into the subsidiary awareness of particulars, which in the performance of skills are instrumental to a skilful achievement, and which in the exercise of connoisseurship function as the elements of the observed comprehensive whole.” This “change of being” is not just a contingent matter, as we learn from Heidegger: without this pouring of ourselves into the subsidiary, we would have no world: we would not be. While I suggest that such
implications are found in Polanyi, they are not elaborated clearly, leaving Polanyi ambiguous at best or at worst contradictory. Webb, for example, claims that “to read Polanyi is for the most part to remain fairly comfortably situated within the world of common sense, where it is still easy to imagine a clear division between subject and object in something like spatial terms.”121 It is true, despite the language described above, that Polanyi can still sound like his subject is ‘poured’ into the world of the object of, for example, science, while Heidegger’s Dasein is always already poured into that world because Dasein is constituted by the world which in its theoretical mode it tries to examine. So, the degree to which Heidegger and Polanyi genuinely overlap, as they approach human knowing and Being-in-the-world from ontological and epistemological directions respectively, depends on how we interpret Polanyi’s terminology such as that discussed above.

How should we understand ‘identify’ when Polanyi speaks of having “identified ourselves” within a framework,122 how literal is his “change of being”123 or his making tools “part of our own body”; or assimilating them “as part of our own existence”?124 While relevant to understanding what exactly Polanyi was pointing to, these questions need not be answered definitively for the purposes of this thesis as my interest is not to know Polanyi’s meaning better than he knew (or explained) it himself; my claim is that Polanyi’s views can be interpreted as compatible with a thoroughly Heideggerian ontology of the human being, which is not just involved in, but constituted by, a web of meaningful relationships. While Heidegger speaks of Being-in-the-world and Polanyi of indwelling, I claim that there is no incoherence in pushing Polanyi’s indwelling in the direction of Being-in-the-world even if Polanyi does not completely grasp the radical nature of Heidegger’s views when he claims that “indwelling is Being-in-the-world.”

122. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 60.
123. Ibid., 64. Polanyi and Grene (ed.), Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi, 134.
In the light of claims by Dreyfus, as well as Zhenhua,\textsuperscript{125} me,\textsuperscript{126} and others, affirming either close parallels between Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world and Polanyi’s understanding of indwelling, Margitay examines Polanyi’s ontological arguments and finds them wanting;\textsuperscript{127} while Polanyi’s structure of knowing corresponds to some structures of Being, according to Margitay, it is only in the particular case of ‘knowledge-like entities’ that their ontological nature is actually reflected in Polanyi’s epistemology.

Before turning to Margitay, I first look more at what Polanyi says about ontology in \textit{The Tacit Dimension}, written a number of years after \textit{Personal Knowledge}, in which Polanyi talks of a structured ontology. His argument is that if an entity is known by dwelling in ‘lower level’ particulars that reveal a ‘higher level’ entity then the ontology of that entity is necessarily hierarchical. That is, if a particular epistemic approach is required, it is required because the ontology demands it. He says: “It seems plausible then to assume in all other instances of tacit knowing the correspondence between the structure of comprehension and the structure of the comprehensive entity which is its object. And we would expect then to find the structure of tacit knowing duplicated in the principles which account for the stability and effectiveness of all real comprehensive entities.”\textsuperscript{128}

Polanyi cites the example of machines, which have ‘dual control’: they are determined physically by the lower order laws of physics and chemistry but also by higher order ‘boundary conditions’ not entailed by the lower level laws. So there is an ontological level higher than the lower one. He also says that while it is possible to describe a machine in terms of a “particular configuration of solids [which] would state

\textsuperscript{125} Zhenhua, “‘Being-in-the-World’ in a Polanyian Perspective.”
\textsuperscript{128} Polanyi, \textit{Tacit Dimension}, 33-34. Polanyi’s italics.
the materials and shapes of the parts, and the boundary conditions by which they are joined together as a system,” such a description is incomplete because, while it would describe a particular example of the class, “it could not characterize a class of machines of the same kind.”

Margitay argues that what Polanyi sees as a necessary relation between epistemology and ontology, exemplified by machines, is only a similarity: Polanyi’s thesis “says no more than that the similarity between the structure of knowing and the structure of reality consists in that the lower level partially, but not fully determines the higher level in both cases and the higher level laws determine it.”

But Margitay seems to miss what Polanyi doesn’t say explicitly: that while an attempt can be made to define a machine in its present-to-handedness by physics and chemistry, it can’t be defined as a machine or as ready-to-hand. And, following a Heideggerian ontology, which, I claim, Polanyi can be read as doing implicitly, the ready-to-hand is part of our world; without the ready-to-hand we have no world. So Polanyi’s higher-level principles are necessary to have a world, otherwise the machine is no longer a *machine*, but rather a collection of solids and spaces governed by the laws of physics.

Having made what is a cursory comment concerning the degree to which Polanyi’s ontology is genuinely Heideggerian, I will not engage with Margitay further because it is tangential to this thesis: while Margitay’s concern is with Polanyi’s specific ontological arguments, my claim in this chapter is simply that Polanyi can be read in a way that is compatible with my description of a HUFPaT and complements its Heideggerian-style ontological claims. I believe that I have made this argument sufficiently and now turn to the work of Gadamer who, in a parallel fashion to the way in which Polanyi’s inexplicit hermeneutic philosophy of the natural sciences does, explicitly shows how a Heideggerian ontology leads to a description of knowing in the human sciences that can be described as a HUFPaT.

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Chapter 5

Gadamer’s “Entirely Different Notion of Knowledge and Truth”

This thesis makes the claim that human access to truth is always ‘hermeneutic’ and is validly described as universal, fiduciary, and provisional. As well, I have emphasised the medial and event-like characteristics intrinsic to a hermeneutic view of knowing. We have seen that Heidegger lays the ontological foundations for such an account and that Polanyi’s assessment of science is at least compatible with HUFPaT, although he overstates his intuition that his ‘indwelling’ is Heidegger’s Being-in-the-world. But while Polanyi’s discussion of the natural sciences is one that can be taken to assume something like a Heideggerian ontology, it is Gadamer, the defining voice in philosophical hermeneutics, who takes the description of his erstwhile teacher and elaborates how such an ontology applies to knowledge and truth in the human sciences. In combination, the trio of Heidegger, Polanyi, and Gadamer, reveals that ‘philosophical hermeneutics’ is a universally applicable description of both the ontological and resulting epistemic dimensions of knowledge, and that it applies to both the human and the natural sciences.

I turn now to an elaboration of various aspects of Gadamer’s thinking that bolster my claim that truth arises in all cases through a process that is necessarily hermeneutic, with the result that, firstly, knowledge claims are always provisional, fiduciary, and made with universal intent, and, secondly, that truth arises in an event-like manner in a medial space between the interpreter and the ‘object’ of interpretation such as an original text or artwork or even spoken words. As we will see, while Gadamer is clear about the hermeneutic, universal, and provisional aspects of the unconcealment of truth, as well as its medial and event-like nature, the fiduciary element is one that he does not emphasise, although it is, nevertheless, implicit in his description, arising out of the committed engagements of the responsible knower. As

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well, Gadamer is insistent that language is the medium through which understanding arises and that without language we would not have a world.

After further preliminary comments about Gadamer including his ambivalent attitude to science, as well as an overview of how he contributes to sustaining my own view, this chapter takes up his discussion of art and the medial nature of play. I then look at aspects of how Gadamer describes human historical situatedness including his notions of the ‘fusion of horizons’ and ‘prejudice’, after which I describe the unity of the dynamic of knowing in Gadamer that includes understanding, interpretation and application. The chapter finishes with a discussion of Gadamer’s understanding of knowledge and truth including further discussion of the place of the natural sciences in his thinking.

Taking up Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics, which is rooted in a view of understanding and truth as partly constitutive of Dasein’s being, Gadamer offers a universal description of human understanding at both ontological and epistemic levels. In fact, I suggest that, in one respect, it is more universal than Gadamer proposes, because he does not go as far as he might in highlighting its epistemological implications for the natural sciences—perhaps an interesting case in point where an author’s meaning reaches beyond their intentions. For Gadamer the hermeneutic circle of understanding functions both ontologically and in epistemic practice, and, in an innovative move, he starts by demonstrating its application to the medial, event-like, and play-like experience of art. He then applies his description to tradition and texts (thus raising questions of authorial role, validity, and truth), and highlights the role of both historical distance and ‘prejudice’. Based on this description, interpretation or understanding are seen to arise out of what he calls a fusion of horizons. Gadamer also highlights the unity of understanding, interpretation, and application as well as the locus of this unified phenomenon in language, which is itself ontologically constitutive of being.
Despite criticisms that his views fall into a significant form of relativism (to be taken up in the following chapter), such as those of Hirsch and Habermas,\textsuperscript{2} Gadamer’s view can be described as a HUFPaT: for him, robust truth is the outcome of the universality of hermeneutics—“not in the sense of a methodology but as a theory of the real experience that thinking is”\textsuperscript{3}—and the universal phenomena of the fusion of horizons and the ubiquitous medium of language. The truth claims arising are \textit{provisional}, in part because truth can never be made complete or transparent due to the nature of human finitude: we find ourselves always and already subject to space, time, history, and our own language, and at the same time that we attempt to transcend them with our positivist epistemic expectations we find ourselves depending upon our situatedness and Gadamerian ‘prejudices’ in order to do so. And while Gadamer is less explicit about the \textit{fiduciary} commitments involved in knowing, they are nevertheless implied by his view of interpreters who are entrenched in, and who put their trust in, the presuppositions bequeathed to them, and who must entrust themselves seriously to the play of interpretation rather than being a spoilsport.\textsuperscript{4}

With respect to natural science, Gadamer is somewhat ambivalent about the degree to which his hermeneutics applies: he never develops a ‘philosophy of the natural sciences’ and while he makes comments indicating that science too relies on a hermeneutic ontology, he also gives regular indications that the methods of natural science make it categorically distinct as a way of knowing. This is in contrast to my claim that the universality of HUFPaT in its full sense incorporates natural science too as both ontologically and epistemically thoroughly hermeneutic. However, for Gadamer, the contrast with science, wherein “methodical purity is indispensible,”\textsuperscript{5} remains clear; I suggest this is because he accepts a view of science—as overly constrained by method—that is called into question by Polanyi and others. So, in


\textsuperscript{3} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, xxxiii.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 555.
contrast to the natural sciences, he says, “it is useless to restrict the elucidation of the nature of the human sciences to a purely methodological question; it is a question not simply of defining a specific method, but rather, of recognizing an entirely different notion of knowledge and truth.” And for him, this being ‘entirely different’ to the natural sciences is because the human sciences “have many other ambitions than those motivated by the natural scientific concept of truth.”6 So, says Gadamer, his hermeneutics seeks a truth “that could not be attained in any other way, even if this contradicts the yardstick of research and progress by which science measures itself.”7

In the face of the perceived cognitive power of the natural sciences and the assumption that legitimation is about demonstrating the validity of, and then using, appropriate methods, the challenge that arises for Gadamer, as it does for Polanyi, is that of justifying truth claims. So while Polanyi re-envisions the actual nature of science, Gadamer makes his own task more difficult by his maintaining a stark contrast between knowing practices in the human versus the natural sciences. Nevertheless, he is right in saying that his solution—“a deeper investigation of the phenomenon of understanding”—is the way to provide this legitimation. To reiterate: for Gadamer, “the human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science: with the experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science.” And so, given this contrast, the question for Gadamer is of “how far the truth claim of such modes of experience outside science can be philosophically legitimated.”9 This is the task Gadamer sets himself in his main work.

Gadamer’s magnum opus, *Truth and Method* is a descriptive investigation into knowledge or understanding in the human sciences. Gadamer says, “it is not my intention to make prescriptions for the sciences or the conduct of life, but to try to

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8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
correct false thinking about what they are.”

He is concerned that the overwhelming confidence in rigorous method that arises out of the obvious success of the natural sciences has led to a dependence on rule-like method as the means to arrive at truth in the human sciences. And, in the face of misunderstanding about his work, he reiterates in the foreword to the second edition: “I did not wish to elaborate a system of rules to describe, let alone direct, the methodical procedure of the human sciences. Nor was it my aim to investigate the theoretical foundation of work in these fields in order to put my findings to practical ends. My concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.”

So, in order to counter the error of relying on method to reveal truth in the human sciences, Gadamer offers a descriptive rather than normative view of how the event of understanding occurs. Vanhoozer clarifies this distinction in the following way:

“Normative theories tend to give rules, methodological procedures, and criteria for ‘correct’ (e.g., non-arbitrary) interpretation. Of the proposed norms, perhaps the most familiar is the charge to discover what the author intended to communicate. Descriptive accounts, by contrast, treat understanding as a mode of being, as something that happens to interpreters ‘above our wanting and doing’ (TM, p. xxviii). A rough generalization: normative accounts tend to be epistemological; descriptive accounts tend to be ontological.”

The clarity of this distinction between descriptive and normative practice is perhaps tendentious in itself, serving the interests of both those who would explicitly argue for particular norms of interpretation and more subtly serving those who would not like to be seen as prescribing norms but do so nevertheless under the guise of description. Furthermore, as this thesis makes clear, descriptive accounts have implications for epistemic practices and cannot be so easily quarantined: any

10. Ibid., xxii.
11. Ibid., xxv-xxvi.
description of how knowledge or understanding is arrived at also makes implicit claims about illegitimate means of arriving at true understanding. But for the moment it is sufficient to accept on face value what Gadamer understands his aim to be, aware that his concern is not primarily to draw epistemic consequences from his description.

Gadamer recognises that the success of natural science makes knowledge claims less plausible in other areas, but insists that in fact hermeneutics is universal: “Given the dominance of modern science in the philosophical elucidation and justification of the concept of knowledge and the concept of truth, this question does not appear legitimate. Yet it is unavoidable, even within the sciences. The phenomenon of understanding not only pervades all human relations to the world. … It resists any attempt to reinterpret it in terms of scientific method.”

In order to achieve its aim, Truth and Method moves from an examination of truth that, according to Gadamer, is revealed in art (from the visual to the dramatic arts) including an important consideration of play, then, in the second of three parts to an understanding of history, tradition, and written texts. Gadamer argues that the meaning of such ‘texts’ can only reveal itself in the two-sided dialogue that he describes as resulting in a fusion of horizons, and that this is only possible once the interpreter is aware of their own constitutive immersion in history. This immersion results in what he describes as \textit{wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein}, usually translated ‘historically effected consciousness’. Finally, in the third part of Truth and Method, Gadamer outlines the basis for his claim (later expressed in his \textit{Philosophical Hermeneutics}) that “the universality of the hermeneutic perspective is all-encompassing.” While hermeneutics is universal in various senses, for Gadamer, it is particularly so because all knowledge and meaning are ultimately expressed in language—although not necessarily in spoken words—which, following Heidegger’s “language is the house of

being,”¹⁶ he describes in his own characteristic way: “Being that can be understood is language.”¹⁷

For Gadamer, hermeneutics is about understanding; it is about the process of coming to know some aspect of human reality, whether that be revealed by a written text, an artwork, history, or spoken language. The truth is revealed in the hermeneutic process and the outcome is knowledge of that reality so revealed. This understanding or knowledge is of the meaning of the text or the tradition or the work of art, and while meanings can be multiple they are not unlimited, so understanding is more than simply personal perception or opinion: truth is revealed, although not exhaustively, in valid interpretation. But while truth is never exhausted or fully known, nevertheless it remains true and can be contrasted with falsity, which arises from erroneous interpretation. All interpretation “seeks ... to be correct,” says Gadamer.¹⁸ So, for him, the outcome of hermeneutic practice is the event-like disclosure of truth or meaning: “Someone who understands is always already drawn into an event through which meaning asserts itself.”¹⁹

Gadamer starts his enquiry into “modes of experience in which a truth is communicated”²⁰ in an unexpected place: with a discussion of truth in art. Interpretation in art is clearly not a matter of method and many would dispute that it is a matter of anything but pure subjectivity. But for Gadamer, who wants to make a distinction between the revealing of truth through understanding on the one hand, and, on the other hand, practices governed by method, art and play serve as exemplary cases where truth and understanding are not rule-governed: they demonstrate that understanding arises from what Gadamer calls the fusion of horizons between interpreter and the interpreted. This understanding, or revealing of truth, cannot be reduced to a procedure or methodical ‘scientific’ investigation into the consciousness of the author of the work of

¹⁷. Gadamer, Truth and Method, 470. Also reiterated in Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, 103.
¹⁹. Ibid., 484.
²⁰. Ibid., xxi.
art. So, with respect to texts, but equally applicable to the gamut of philosophical
ermeneutics, Gadamer says, “the hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem
of method at all. It is not concerned with a method of understanding by means of which
texts are subjected to scientific investigation like all other objects of experience. It is not
concerned primarily with amassing verified knowledge, such as would satisfy the
methodological ideal of science—yet it too is concerned with knowledge and with truth.
In understanding tradition not only are texts understood, but insights are acquired and
truths known.”

However, Gadamer’s knowledge cannot be reduced to theoretical
reason without remainder; like Polanyi, who appeals to the tacit powers of the
scientist’s judgment, Gadamer too stands against the Enlightenment confidence in the
power of theoretical reason alone to achieve knowledge of the world—a hope
invalidated, he says, by Hume and Kant—and he appeals to the history of a broader
sense of reason that includes common sense, “defend[ing] the rights of the probable”
and the verisimilar, and practical knowledge, such as that of the judge or the
clergyman. He says that behind theoretical knowledge lies practical knowledge, rooted
in community and in Vico’s sensus communis: “According to Vico, what gives the
human will its direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete
universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole
human race. Hence developing this communal sense is of decisive importance for
living.”

Truth and Method offers examples of others who are not constrained by the idea
that truth must emerge from a single method; Shaftesbury includes humour as part of
his defence of the sensus communis; and Bergson appeals to intuition in his criticisms of

21. Ibid., xx.
24. Ibid., xx.
25. Ibid., 19.
26. Ibid., 22.
natural science’s abstractions. And in a later essay, “The Power of Reason,” Gadamer says more generally:

In order to be able to dedicate oneself wholly to the theoretical, one must presuppose “practical knowledge,” the power of reason to provide guidance in human behavior. … “Reasonableness” is much rather a human attitude, something that one sticks to and sees through, in order to create and preserve ever anew moral and human arrangements build [sic] on common norms. … It is only as the idea of science has begun to subordinate all self-evidence to the new science of nature, to its methods and its requirement of verification, that legitimacy has more and more been withdrawn from the knowledge arising from this “practical science.”

So, says Gadamer, given that valid knowledge is not limited to “the possibilities of rational proof,” the task of hermeneutics is to recover a sense of knowledge that is in danger of being lost by “showing the difficulties that result from the application of the modern concept of method to the human sciences. … How the human sciences’ claim to know something true came to be measured by a standard foreign to it—namely the methodical thinking of modern science”—although his view of ‘modern science’ is not one recognised as verisimilar by the scientist-philosopher Polanyi.

I turn now to Gadamer’s elucidation of the experience of truth in art and his use of play as a parallel that throws light on the mediality and the ultimately non-rule-based nature of the event in which truth is disclosed.

5.1 Truth in art and the mediality of play

Gadamer criticises the Kantian subjectivisation of ‘common sense’ or ‘judgment’, which relegates them to a matter of aesthetic taste and in the process privileges method-governed knowledge. He says that this “radical subjectivization involved in Kant’s new way of grounding aesthetics was truly epoch-making” because in its discrediting of knowledge apart from that of the natural sciences, the human sciences were obliged to “rely on the methodology of the natural sciences in conceptualizing themselves.” In reply, Gadamer contrasts aesthetic consciousness

27. Ibid., 23.
30. Ibid., 17ff.
31. Ibid., 36-37.
with the experience of art. Following Heidegger and drawing on the German *Erfahrung* (rather than *Erlebnis*, which has the connotation of private subjective experience) Gadamer believes that the experience of art is not merely a matter of subjective consciousness, but of ontological disclosure. Art, he says, “is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that knowledge.”32 Rather than abstracting the work of art from the context in which it is encountered and speaks, this (*Erfahrung*) experience is the key to art: “our concern is to view the experience of art in such a way that it is understood as experience (*Erfahrung*). The experience of art should not be falsified by being turned into a possession of aesthetic culture, thus neutralizing its special claim. We will see that this involves a far-reaching hermeneutical consequence, for *all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event. This is what must be emphasized against aesthetic consciousness and its neutralization of the question of truth.*33

One implication of Gadamer’s elucidation of art is that the interpretation of a work of art is never finished: truth is always provisional, always remaining to be revealed rather than being finally reached—perhaps by arriving at the ‘mind of the artist’, which in any case is not the truth revealed by the *work*—and the truth that is revealed can never be explicitly expressed as it reveals itself differently to future generations of interpreters.34 Gadamer says: “The experience [*Erfahrung*] of art acknowledges that it cannot present the full truth of what it experiences in terms of definitive knowledge. There is no absolute progress and no final exhaustion of what lies in a work of art.”35 In Thiselton’s words, the experience of art “is essentially experience of reality (*Wirklichkeitserfahrung*). … Even if we could fuse together the conscious states of all who had beheld a work of art over a long period, this would not guarantee that we had an exhaustive disclosure of its own content.”36

32. Ibid., 84.
35. Ibid., 86.
However, Gadamer would go further than Thiselton. This lack of a “guarantee” is not simply a reflection of contingent epistemic limitations: provisionality is ubiquitous because the ontology of ‘the work’ makes it impossible in principle to arrive at a fixed content; the work itself arises out of its history. The being of the work is found in its representations, or better, in its presentations or, in the sense that is used particularly for musical performance, in its interpretations, as much as in an origin distant in time and space. “In its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be,” says Gadamer.\(^{37}\) While it is not the original, neither is the work, which does the presenting, a diminished form; it has its own autonomous reality. So, in the case of a picture, for example, while a mere copy is the outcome of a one-sided relationship with a distant original, the autonomous reality of the picture reveals the meaning itself: “what is pictured … comes to presentation in the representation. It presents itself there.” But, says Gadamer, while this presentation genuinely reveals truth about the content, “it does not follow that it is dependent on this particular presentation in order to appear. It can also present itself as what it is in other ways.” The ontological implication of this view of presentation is that the event of revealing, reveals the being of the thing itself: “Every such presentation is an ontological event and occupies the same ontological level as what is represented. By being presented it experiences, as it were, an increase in being. The content of the picture itself is ontologically defined as an emanation of the original.”\(^{38}\)

Gadamer draws on examples such as the Lutheran understanding of preaching or the Roman Catholic mass\(^{39}\) where reality is mediated by the words or the rite and manifests itself in the present. In Thiselton’s words, “interpretation is not a mechanical reproduction of the past in the present, but a creative event in its own right. … A picture … is an ontological event in which truth is disclosed in the present.”\(^{40}\) For Gadamer, there can be no doubt that “art is never simply past but is able to overcome temporal

\(^{37}\) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 123.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 135.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{40}\) Thiselton, *Two Horizons*, 299.
distance by virtue of its own meaningful presence,”41 and, for him, reading great literature brings something alien and dead to life; the miracle of interpretation achieves “the sheer presence of the past” as truth is disclosed in the process of understanding.42 Palmer puts it this way:

A work of art is not a world divorced from our own or it could not illuminate our own self-understanding even as we come to understand it. In an encounter with a work of art we do not go into a foreign universe stepping outside of time and history; we do not separate ourselves from ourselves or from the nonaesthetic. … When we see a great work of art and enter its world, we do not leave home so much as ‘come home.’ We say at once: truly it is so! The artist has said what is.43

My claim is that Gadamer’s description of art, and, later in Truth and Method, of texts and tradition, is a description of how it is with all human knowing and that the various characteristics of HUFPaT are found, more or less explicitly in his account. As a medial, event-like ‘bringing into the present’, for Gadamer, understanding or coming to know is hermeneutic in both its ontological conditions and in its practice of knowing. It is a present manifestation of truth; an unconcealing or revealing that is only truly (but always partially) revealed when understood. So, the claim of this thesis is that there is no other access to knowledge except via this hermeneutic revealing of meaning that occurs for those who stand in the medial space and listen to the voice of the other for the truth it reveals through conversation or literature or scientific discourse or tradition or other and various forms of art.

As alluded to above, musical performance is a case where the word ‘interpretation’ is seen to be used with an obviously performative meaning, and this use in fact reveals something of the nature of all interpretation, which, as we will see later in this chapter, Gadamer expresses by uniting understanding, interpretation, and application in one hermeneutic activity. Like the performance of a stage play, but most clearly seen in music, there can be no separation of ‘the work’ from its interpretation. In the performance, “we encounter the work itself,”44 Gadamer says, unconvinced “by the

41. Gadamer, Truth and Method, 158.
42. Ibid., 156.
objection that the performance of a musical work of art is interpretation in a different sense from, say, reaching understanding in reading a poem or looking at a painting. All performance is primarily interpretation and seeks, as such, to be correct. In this sense, it too is ‘understanding.’”

Musical performance also has as its Polanyian corollary in highlighting the tacit knowledge and fiduciary nature of the commitment on the part of the knower. Before turning to further elucidation of Gadamer, I take up a description of musical interpretation by the late music theorist and composer, Edward Cone, which rings with Heideggerian, Gadamerian, and Polanyian overtones although none of these authors is mentioned specifically by Cone.

In language remarkably like that of Heidegger and Gadamer, and highlighting Polanyi’s ‘tacit knowledge’ and the lack of specific rules to determine practice, Cone speaks of the interpretation of a piece of music occurring in an open space created by the score. He differentiates between the “convincing as opposed to the merely correct” performance, the former being an interpretation that reflects the musician’s “deeply felt personal involvement with the musical thought of the composition.” The score itself offers only an approximate indication of the indeterminate outcome encountered in a performance; in fact, Cone says, “it is exactly the space cleared by [the score’s] approximation, an area of indeterminacy, that is the locus of the performer’s prime interpretative activity.” Examples Cone offers of the performer’s creative interpretation include variations in pitch and tempo: despite the accuracy of pitch possible with modern instruments, the skilled performer deliberately makes use of minute variations in pitch as well as interpreting, rather than mechanically duplicating, the score’s indications of tempo. In both cases the performer strays from a formally correct rendition of the score.

45. Ibid., xxviii.
46. Edward Cone, “The Pianist as Critic,” in The Practice of Performance: Studies in Musical Interpretation, ed. John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). There is no indication in Cone’s article that he has read either Heidegger or Gadamer. I came across the reference to Cone’s work in a response by Cynthia Nielsen to a comment on her blog post at http://churchandpomo.typepad.com/conversation/2008/06/a-gadamarian-cr.html (last accessed September 25, 2015.)
Although he does not use the language of Polanyi, Cone highlights the personal judgment and tacit knowledge involved on the part of the performer as they constantly make interpretive decisions.\(^{47}\) However, such decisions are not made arbitrarily; this is not an ‘anything goes’ relativism, because the performer’s first obligation is responsible submission to “the authority of the written score.” And, says Cone, “while the score remains one authoritative measure of the validity of all … conceptions [of its performance], it can never have been so completely and perfectly notated as to permit only one re-creation as uniquely correct. … We should speak, then, not of the but of a correct performance, and similarly of a valid critique.”\(^{48}\) So, according to Cone, the performer is involved in a relationship, which I would describe as fiduciary, as they make a claim about the truth of the piece to be revealed in its present interpretation: “In the case of the familiar masterpiece, the pianist’s guarantee of its value is almost bound to involve a further commitment on his part. He implies that the piece has not been exhausted by all its previous performances, and he promises an interpretation which is somehow novel—which will impart news to this audience, at this place, at this time.”\(^{49}\)

Cone’s example of the performer’s interpretation of a score parallels Gadamer’s description of “the excess of meaning”\(^{50}\) in the language of art and the way in which the meaning of a text extends far beyond either authorial intention or one fixed interpretation. Gadamer says: “The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience … it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter. … Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well.”\(^{51}\)

Bruce Ellis Benson also explores hermeneutics through music, suggesting that hermeneutics is improvisational in the sense that an interpretation is a creative act that

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 244-245.


\(^{49}\) Cone, “The Pianist as Critic,” 242. Italics added.

\(^{50}\) Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 102.

‘resuscitates’ rather than copies the original: “To say that interpretation is improvisatory is to emphasize the role of interpreters in ‘fleshing out’ the meaning of the text. Given that texts never ‘mean’ by themselves and so must be ‘resuscitated’ each time they are read (or performed) by interpretation, the role of the interpreter (or performer) is crucial. … Even the interpreter who is fully committed to the goal of respecting the text and the author’s intentions is never simply ‘repeating’ the text (or score). If texts and scores are ‘underdetermined,’ then the reading that results from an interpretation is always improvisatory.”

*The mediality of play*

In his discussion of art, Gadamer highlights the medial space in which interpretation occurs by drawing an illuminating parallel between the concept of play and the encounter with art. With respect to play, Gadamer emphasises “the primacy of play over the consciousness of the player” and that “play fulfils its purpose only if the player loses himself in his play.” So a game masters the player by creating a ‘world’, which, despite knowing that it is ‘only a game’, the player takes seriously, rather than the alternative of being a spoilsport. In this ‘serious play’ the players throw themselves into the game, the reality of which is encountered in the playing itself and independent of the consciousness of the player. Furthermore, says Gadamer (and crucial to the ontological understanding of the work of art) the reality of the interpreter too is changed in the play-like but serious encounter with art:

The work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it. The “subject” of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself. This is the point at which the mode of being of play becomes significant. For play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play. … The players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation (Darstellung) through the players.

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54. Ibid., 103.
55. Ibid.
So play is a medial activity, says Gadamer, governed by a “to-and-fro motion” that the players contribute to, but which does not depend on the consciousness of the individual player.\textsuperscript{56} Understandings of the being of play or of the artwork or of whatever is interpreted arise out of this medial space, the dynamics and outcomes of which the human agent cannot ultimately control. Wachterhauser’s comment referring to historical understanding and Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’ is equally applicable to describe the mediality of art and play: “we are neither complete masters nor docile slaves but participants in a broader movement of meaning.”\textsuperscript{57} And, I would add, we are responsible participants with a fiduciary commitment not to play the spoilsport.

While other commentators have paid scant respect to the middle voice in Gadamer, even where he talks of it explicitly—for example, when he says, “the primordial sense of play is the medial one”\textsuperscript{58}—Philippe Eberhard emphasises the importance of this eventual, medial meaning of play to Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a whole. In hermeneutics it is not subject or event that takes priority; “in the middle voice, the subject understands within the event of understanding. The question of the subject is not a matter of either/or but of both-and. The event happens and the subject understands.”\textsuperscript{59}

I turn now to Gadamer’s portrayal of how this medial event-like understanding of interpretation relates to history and tradition through his innovative description of interpretation as the ‘fusion of horizons’.

\textbf{5.2 Tradition, historical distance, and the fusion of horizons}

In the light of Heidegger’s radical rethinking of the constitution of Dasein as Being-in-the-world, traditional hermeneutics, with its objectivist and methodological ideals, rings hollow in not paying due attention to the nature and historical finitude of that Dasein/subject, which finds itself always and already immersed within, part of, and partially constituted by, tradition.\textsuperscript{60} As Palmer explains, a Heideggerian (and Gadamerian) hermeneutics is based not on “the way that the world belongs to a human

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 105.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 104, cf. 103-104.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Eberhard, \textit{The Middle Voice in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics}, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method}, 250-251.
\end{itemize}
subject but on the way in which the human subject belongs to the world. This belongingness occurs through the process of ‘understanding.’ So basic is the process that it is not so much one thing among others which one does but that process in which and through which one exists as a human being.”

I will turn in the next section to Gadamer’s understanding of understanding but in this section I summarise his description of the interpreter’s relation to history and tradition, and the implications this has for the illusory quest for that sort of objectivity that comes with the ‘view from nowhere’ based on a Cartesian attempt to put aside all presuppositions.

‘Prejudice’ and provisionality

Taking his cue from Heidegger’s outline of the fore-structure of understanding in *Being and Time*, and the necessary circularity that this brings to the interpretive process Gadamer emphasises the ontological inevitability and epistemic necessity of bringing what he calls ‘prejudices’ to the task of interpretation.

Gadamer criticises past theorists such as Schleiermacher for an approach to history which fails to recognise that the inevitable presence of ‘prejudice’ and historical distance rules out attempts to use the methodology of objective science as a way to understanding. Rather than an objective observer-subject looking out at the world of the text or artwork or history from a perch above and removed from the world, Gadamer points to the reality of the presupposition-laden ‘horizon’ (a Husserlian and Heideggerian metaphor). This horizon is bequeathed to the interpreter by tradition (however, at the same time, it is a horizon in which the interpreter too is immersed and which the interpreter contributes to with every new interpretation, thus advancing the tradition). So, for Gadamer, the search for understanding is couched in terms of the ubiquitous nature of our mostly unconscious pre-judgments or prejudices—the two words are the same in German—that are part and parcel of our always already being in a world.


According to Gadamer, the “prejudice against prejudice”64 was the downfall of Enlightenment epistemology and, in contrast, his philosophical hermeneutics is based not just on the recognition of prejudices but on the essential role that pre-judgments play not only as conditions of understanding but also as the essential context out of which any understanding can even occur. With respect to the ubiquity of prejudices—which I have already referred to in discussion of the universality of the circle of understanding, and in different terms in my mention of Taylor’s social imaginaries or of Berger’s plausibility structures—Gadamer says in an oft-quoted, important passage: “History does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the pre-judgments of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being.”65

However, against seeing this condition as problematic, Gadamer highlights that the negative connotation of prejudice arises from Cartesian demands and is an Enlightenment attitude. Rightly understood, he says, ‘prejudice’ is “a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined.” In fact, the negative sense of ‘prejudice’ is historically derivative on a legal meaning arising from the positive sense, which understood prejudice as “the value of the provisional decision as a prejudgment, like that of any precedent.”66 So, for Gadamer (and, as we have seen, for Polanyi), prejudice, in the sense of presupposition, “certainly does not necessarily mean a false judgment,”67 but is an awareness of the essential presence of presuppositions, thus calling our attention to the preliminary and

64. Ibid., 273.
65. Ibid., 278. Gadamer’s italics. In this quotation and in various places I have changed the translator’s ‘prejudice’ to ‘pre-judgment’ which equally represents the original German Vorurteil. In English, perhaps neither word suffices: ‘pre-judgment’ has the connotation of a deliberate isolated act and does not carry the weight of the all-encompassing nature of what Gadamer is referring to, while ‘prejudice’ is arresting, calling attention to itself, but has a negative connotation of needing to be eradicated.
66. Ibid., 273.
67. Ibid.
provisional nature of all judgment, because there is no possibility of reaching
‘objective’ conclusions that are finally divorced from all presuppositions. In fact, as we
have seen in Polanyi’s description and as we will see in Gadamer’s, which draws on
Heidegger’s ‘circle of understanding’, such pre-judgments are a prerequisite to
knowing, and this inherent circularity entails a provisionality that prevents us assigning
a definitive status to our knowing. In Polanyi’s words, it is “logically impossible for the
human mind to divest itself of all uncritically acquired foundations. For our minds
cannot unfold at all except by embracing a definite idiom of beliefs, which will
inevitably determine the scope of our entire subsequent fiducial development.”68

If such pre-judgments do indeed turn out to be an essential part of the
understanding process and if the hope of objectivity or final knowledge is in fact a
chimera (which is the case for both ontological and epistemological reasons, as we are
coming to see), then what Gadamer calls the “fundamental epistemological question”
concerns the legitimacy of pre-judgments. That question is: “What distinguishes
legitimate prejudices from the countless others, which it is the undeniable task of
critical reason to overcome?”69 For the purposes of this thesis, it is again interesting to
note the parallel here with the view of science of Polanyi, who is in no doubt about the
naivete of a program of Cartesian doubt that aims to eliminate preconceived opinions.70
He says that “while we can reduce the sum of our conscious acceptances to varying
degrees, and even to nil, by reducing ourselves to a state of stupor, any given range of
awareness seems to involve a correspondingly extensive set of a-critically accepted
beliefs. Thus the programme of comprehensive doubt collapses and reveals by its
failure the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality.”71

The circle of understanding

In order to avoid naive objectivism, interpreters must take account of their own
pre-judgments by recognising the universality of the hermeneutic circle in which

69. Gadamer, Truth and Method, 278.
70. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 295.
71. Ibid., 296-297.
preliminary understanding is revised in interpretive practice. Epistemically, truth is never complete but always provisional because the circle is ubiquitous and prejudice is never finally overcome; knowing always involves an ever-growing circle or spiral of understanding. In speaking of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, Gadamer affirms the provisionality and incompleteness of understanding, which inevitably arises from this dynamically expanding hermeneutic circle as the interpreter moves between the whole and the parts: “this circle is constantly expanding, since the concept of the whole is relative, and being integrated in ever larger contexts always affects the understanding of the individual part. Schleiermacher applies his usual procedure of a polar dialectical description to hermeneutics, and thus he takes account of the fact that understanding is provisional and unending.”

While the following important passage, drawing on Heidegger’s description of the circle, depicts this process in terms of textual interpretation, Gadamer also clarifies that he is describing a universal procedure that “we in fact exercise whenever we understand anything.” It should be noted too that his language of confirmation and disconfirmation could be transposed into a Polanyian key: we have seen that Polanyi speaks of impossible ideals of objectivity, of truth manifesting itself ever anew, and of the personal judgment involved in taking the provisional and fiduciary leap to make knowledge claims. Gadamer says:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there. … Every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning; rival projects can emerge side by side until it becomes clearer what the unity of meaning is; interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation.

By now, it is clear that this circle is inescapable, both ontologically and epistemically. Ontologically it is simply a description of the only path to understanding.

73. Ibid., 270.
74. Ibid., 269-270.
because it reflects the human constitution as understanding beings (as we have seen clearly in the discussion of Heidegger); this is something Gadamer adopts without question. Epistemically, the circle serves us as we recognise that we must “break the spell of our own fore-meanings … [which] can go entirely unnoticed,” otherwise we run the risk that our understanding will conform itself only to our prejudices.

As is clear from the description above, when Gadamer speaks of the prejudices of an individual, it is not the isolated Cartesian ‘I’ that he thinks of: his interpreter’s prejudices, as well as their conscious beliefs and ways of thinking, arise from the individual’s place in a world—or, better, in the unity that is the co-constitution of individual and ‘world’ along with history, culture and community; we are always already part of the tradition and history and cultural community which our pre-judgments reflect and which we at times choose to reflect upon. This recognition of presuppositions and their connection to the particular community and tradition of which the interpreter is a part highlights the role of history and the effect of temporal and historical distance on interpretation; all interpretation is located in a tradition that reaches back to other times and places. So, says Gadamer, “every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of a tension between the text and the present. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out.” This conscious recognition of the debt to tradition—indeed, as provisionally accepting tradition as authoritative—is not irrational, but is the only alternative once one has recognised the validity of the picture Heidegger and Gadamer paint of the human ‘subject’. Hence, says Gadamer, “understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated. This is what must be validated by hermeneutic theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a procedure, a method.”

So, as Palmer puts it,

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75. Ibid., 270-271.
76. Ibid., 305.
77. Ibid., 291.
The present is seen and understood only through the intentions, ways of seeing, and preconceptions bequeathed from the past. Gadamer’s hermeneutics and his critique of historical consciousness assert that the past is not like a pile of facts which can be made an object of consciousness, but rather is a stream in which we move and participate, in every act of understanding. Tradition, then, is not over against us but something in which we stand and through which we exist; for the most part it is so transparent a medium that it is invisible to us—as invisible as water to a fish.\(^7\)

The consequence, for Gadamer, of this setting of interpretation in tradition is a constant ‘reinterpretation’ process down the ages as each generation re-understands historical texts, ‘indwelling’ and becoming part of the tradition: “Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself.”\(^7\)

**Temporal distance and the possibility of critique**

In response to the criticism that pre-judgments and temporal or historical distance present a problem for hermeneutics, Gadamer insists that the opposite is the case. Both temporal distance and prejudice play a positive role in interpretation. In the case of historical distance, the temporal and cultural separation between interpreter and what is being interpreted is a “productive condition enabling understanding”\(^8\) and consists in a “filtering process” that aids in distinguishing between those pre-judgments that are fruitful and those that aren’t. This process, he says, “not only lets local and limited prejudices die away, but allows those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such.”\(^8\) It is not just that the interpreter’s judgments bring into question the assumptions of another time and place, but the interpreter’s own assumptions are called to the bar of examination, “provoked” into appearing as they are addressed from afar. So, in place of being an unbridgeable abyss between past and present, temporal distance “is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in the light of which everything handed down presents itself to us.”\(^8\)

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80. Ibid., 297.
81. Ibid., 298.
82. Ibid., 297.
The result of this dynamic dialogue between the interpreter and the interpreted is better understanding, says Gadamer, because “it not only lets local and limited prejudices die away, but allows those that bring about genuine understanding to emerge clearly as such.”

In the process of attempting to understand a text, if we are to take it seriously as worthy of listening to and as addressing us, we are called to foreground our own pre-judgments, bringing them to notice and thereby suspending their validity for the purpose of understanding. And as we do so we reveal the interrogative structure of what is put to us by the interpreted. Having exposed our pre-judgments to scrutiny we are called to account by the other, as Gadamer summarises:

Often temporal distance can solve question [sic] of critique in hermeneutics, namely how to distinguish the true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones, by which we misunderstand. Hence the hermeneutically trained mind will also include historical consciousness. It will make conscious the prejudices governing our own understanding, so that the text, as another’s meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own. Foregrounding (abheben) a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us. For as long as our mind is influenced by a prejudice, we do not consider it a judgment. How then can we foreground it? It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. The encounter with a traditionary text can provide this provocation. For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity. Understanding begins, as we have already said above, when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics. We now know what this requires, namely the fundamental suspension of our own prejudices. But all suspension of judgments and hence, a fortiori, of prejudices, has the logical structure of a question.

Effective history and the fusion of horizons

As we have seen, part of recognising our pre-judgments is recognising the power of history: our conscious and unconscious pre-judgments are profoundly affected by the historical tradition in which we live. It is not that we are passively immersed in a historical tradition that simply conditions our thinking; rather, there is a dynamic play between interpretation and history captured in Gadamer’s discussion of “history of effect,” which points to the fact that all shared interpretation or discussion is also ‘history in the making’. For Gadamer this is the double-edged sword of

83. Ibid., 298.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid., 299.
wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewuβtsein, often translated “historically effected consciousness,”86 which describes the consciousness that a historical phenomenon never appears except within the context of its history and tradition (of which I too am a part), including its tradition of interpretation. Consequently, this is a double awareness that, on the one hand, our very thinking is affected by history and on the other hand our interpretations inevitably contribute to form part of that history itself. So, says Thiselton, Gadamer’s principle of effective history captures the relationship between tradition and temporal distance: “the actual operation of history on the process of understanding itself.”87 (Although Polanyi doesn’t elaborate his understanding in this way, he too recognises something similar when, in the context of a discussion of authority, he says that when we submit to authority or even react against the prevailing consensus we also modify the balance of that consensus.88) While a naive historical objectivism might insist otherwise, the interpreter cannot avoid the influence of effective history. “The power of effective history does not depend on its being recognized,”89 says Gadamer, and in fact, while the hermeneutic ‘situation’ is universal, the conclusions must always be provisional for the reasons that we have seen explicated by Heidegger and Gadamer above. Gadamer elucidates:

Consciousness of being affected by history (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewuβtsein) is primarily consciousness of the hermeneutical situation. … The very idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it. We always find ourselves within a situation, and throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished. This is also true of the hermeneutic situation—i.e., the situation in which we find ourselves with regard to the tradition that we are trying to understand. The illumination of this situation—reflection on effective history—can never be completely achieved; yet the fact that it cannot be completed is due not to a deficiency in reflection but to the essence of the historical being that we are. To be historically means that knowledge of oneself can never be complete. All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven.90

Arising from this recognition of two ‘horizons’ that contribute to interpretation is Gadamer’s innovative metaphor that sees the task of hermeneutics as the ‘fusion of

86. Ibid., 301.
88. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 208-209.
89. Gadamer, Truth and Method, 300.
90. Ibid., 301.
horizons’. These two horizons change as the interpreter moves and the hermeneutic situation is determined by the pre-judgments introduced into the interpretive process. Genuine understanding takes place when a fusion of horizons occurs between past and present, between text and interpreter. But critical distance and tension is never entirely swallowed up; despite Gadamer’s language of the ‘fusion’ of horizons, he is clear that the challenge is to bring out the ever-remaining tension and not deny it. So Gadamer’s metaphor is of ‘two horizons’ either side of an effective history of interpretation, that are fused in the process of understanding—so long as ‘fused’ does not imply an elimination of the two horizons. These horizons are in constant flux as the interpreter comes first with their own prejudgments and then in the interpretive process reincorporates their own understanding into the history of interpretation, constituting and reconstituting Gadamer’s dynamic “horizon of a particular present … beyond which it is impossible to see” but which is constantly tested and adapted in the encounter with the other. This fusion of horizons results in genuine understanding, but not understanding that is static or that removes the tension between interpreter and interpreted; a critical distance always remains and it is the hermeneut’s duty to ensure it is recognised rather than covered over with a spurious objectivity or method.

Notwithstanding the importance of this critical distance, Gadamer also warns against misunderstanding his ‘fusion of horizons’ as originating with two independent horizons; his concept of effective history means that both history and the interpreter are continuously co-constituted. The fusion of which he speaks is a constant dynamic process without which there is neither history nor understanding, and it is historical consciousness that makes us aware of this fact and enables better interpretation. Gadamer says: “it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own. On the other hand, it is itself, as we are trying to show, only something superimposed upon continuing tradition, and hence it immediately recombines with what it has

91. Ibid., 305.
92. Ibid., 303.
foregrounded itself from in order to become one with itself again in the unity of the historical horizon that it thus acquires.”

In order to avoid misunderstanding in interpretation, the task is to “transpose ourselves into the historical horizon” from which the ‘object’ of interpretation originates, whether this be a text or simply a conversation in which I try to understand where someone “is coming from.” But in understanding of an alien horizon, it is *ourselves* that we must transpose in order to imagine the other situation; putting oneself in another’s shoes in this way raises understanding to a universality above the level of the particularity of either oneself or the other that is interpreted. This endpoint of interpretation is what Gadamer calls ‘application’, drawing in the third of the unified and essential elements that make up the trinity of understanding-interpretation-application. He summarises:

> Projecting a historical horizon, then, is only one phase in the process of understanding; it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs—which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded. To bring about this fusion in a regulated way is the task of what we called historically effected consciousness. … it is, in fact, the central problem of hermeneutics. It is the problem of *application*, which is to be found in all understanding.

I will return shortly to the importance of application in bringing meaning and truth into the present.

### 5.3 Understanding, interpretation, and application

As I have alluded to above, Gadamer bases his discussion of understanding on Heidegger and accepts the latter’s description of understanding as ontologically constitutive of the interpreter. For Gadamer, Heidegger has “shown convincingly” that

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93. Ibid., 305.
94. Ibid., 302.
95. Ibid., 304.
96. Ibid., 305-306.
97. However, I question whether Gadamer faithfully conveys Heidegger’s distinction between understanding and interpretation. This question is not directly relevant to the content of this thesis because both Heidegger and Gadamer offer support for my ‘dynamic of knowing’, which Gadamer speaks of as the unity of understanding, interpretation and application. Two instances where Gadamer seems to use ‘interpretation’ for what Heidegger would call understanding can be found at the following
understanding is not one possible manner of acting on the part of the interpreting subject but is “the mode of being of Dasein itself.” So hermeneutics is ontologically (as well as epistemically) universal: hermeneutics, Gadamer says, “denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world. … the nature of the thing itself makes the movement of understanding comprehensive and universal.”98 Therefore understanding lies far deeper than an ideal pursued by human experience or philosophy: “Before any differentiation of understanding into the various directions of pragmatic or theoretical interest, understanding is Dasein’s mode of being, insofar as it is potentiality-for-being and ‘possibility.’ … Understanding is the original characteristic of the being of human life itself.”99

Arising from this view of understanding comes Gadamer’s rejection of the pre-romantic division of hermeneutics into discrete practices of understanding, interpretation, and application (for example by J. J. Rambach).100 Romantic hermeneutics advanced one step in the direction of a better description of interpretive practice by recognising that “interpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding.” This unity of understanding and interpretation brought to the fore the centrality of language to all understanding, which Gadamer develops in the latter part of Truth and Method.101 But this romantic fusion of understanding and interpretation excluded the problem of application, which was seen to be another stage independent of, and barred from, the proper purview of hermeneutics.102 For Gadamer, application too is part of the “one unified …


99. Ibid., 250.
100. Ibid., 306.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
hermeneutical process” and just as integral as understanding and interpretation. It should be no surprise that hermeneutic practice involves application: in the case of interpreting a language, says Gadamer, “an interpreter’s task is not simply to repeat what one of the partners says in the discussion he is translating, but to express what is said in the way that seems most appropriate to him, considering the real situation of the dialogue, which only he knows, since he alone knows both languages being used in the discussion.” And the history of theological and legal hermeneutics—wherein lie the roots of the discipline—is evidence that application must always be integral to valid interpretation and understanding. The validity of legal judgments and of biblical interpretation is only found in the event of their being applied: “the text, whether law or gospel, if it is to be understood properly—i.e., according to the claim it makes—must be understood every moment, in every concrete situation, in a new and different way. Understanding here is always application.”

Once again, the descriptions above by Cone of the musician’s interpretation of a score, or by Polanyi of the scientist’s fiduciary judgment, are paralleled by Gadamer. In music, to interpret means to apply; one cannot interpret in silence. And in Polanyi’s outline of the dynamics of belief he makes clear the personal involvement of the scientist as an interpreter/discoverer of reality who does not just ‘know’, for example, that F=ma, but in understanding, knows how Newton’s laws apply, and indeed when they do not apply: the physicist knows the possibilities of F=ma as well as the limits of those possibilities. For neither Gadamer, nor Heidegger, nor Polanyi, is theoretical detachment a way to knowing: the hermeneutic dynamic of knowing is rooted in ontological and epistemic engagement, and this engagement consists in the personal commitment involved as interpreters or knowers entrust themselves to the other’s horizon and allow their own horizons to be modified in the medial space ‘between horizons’ in which truth arises.

103. Ibid., 307.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
Although Gadamer does not use the word ‘fiduciary’, his description of the engagement of the interpreter, never free of the fallibility that arises from historically effected consciousness, is comparable to that of Polanyi and can validly be described in similar terms: the interpreter responsibly commits themselves with universal intent, yet provisionally, to the truth of what is interpreted, and, in the sense that the judge or the preacher does, stakes a personal, fiduciary claim, above and beyond the possibilities of method, about the contemporary meaning/application of the text. All interpretive judgment is offered in trust: “trust me as I have entrusted myself to others in arriving at the valid meaning,” says the interpreter. For Gadamer, while he does not elaborate this fiduciary dimension, legal and theological hermeneutics are appropriate models of entrusting oneself to the meaning of the text and its call to “respond to what it has to tell us.” So, he says, “to interpret the law’s will or the promises of God is clearly not a form of domination but of service. They are interpretations—which includes application—in the service of what is considered valid.”

A law enacted in the past is done so in order to be interpreted and applied in particular future (now present) cases: “the work of interpretation is to concretize the law in each specific case—i.e., it is a work of application.” And, in the case of biblical interpretation, the importance of application is clear to Gadamer: “the gospel does not exist in order to be understood as a merely historical document, but to be taken in such a way that it exercises its saving effect.” From a Christian perspective, if application is not understood as an integral part of true understanding and interpretation then the Good News becomes a dead letter. The danger, says Thiselton, lies in not allowing the text to speak anew: “the subject matter of the text must not be simply assimilated into the horizon of a pre-existing theological tradition in the present.”

It is this integration of application, arising from the ontological engagement of the interpreter with the world of the ‘text’, that puts the lie to Hirsch’s claim that

106. Ibid., 310.
107. Ibid., 325.
108. Ibid., 307.
understanding/interpretation can be separated from application—in Hirsch’s terms, this is the demarcation of meaning from significance. To interpret is always to be able to apply or it is to misinterpret; valid interpretation is to know what the present possibilities of the text’s truth are; it is to know how the text may speak truth into the world of the interpreter; in Heideggerian terms, the text’s meanings are its applicable possibilities. As it is for the musician, interpretation is always an active performance in which truth is revealed; this is what Gadamer means when he rightly says that understanding, interpretation and application are all of a piece in hermeneutic practice.

5.4 Knowledge and truth

The description above has made it clear that Gadamer’s portrayal of philosophical hermeneutics supports the view that truth in the human sciences is arrived at through a process that can be described as hermeneutic, universal, fiduciary, and provisional; in short, that, within the realms of the human sciences, HUPaT is confirmed by Gadamer’s thinking, although, while I am not the only person to use ‘fiduciary’ to describe his work, it is perhaps not a term he would own.

There is no doubt that, for Gadamer, the outcome of the hermeneutic process is knowledge: in the first paragraph of his introduction to Truth and Method he says, “the hermeneutic phenomenon … is concerned with knowledge and with truth: In understanding tradition not only are texts understood, but insights are acquired and truths known. But what kind of knowledge and what kind of truth?” A recurring feature of Gadamer’s answer to this question is that, in contradistinction to one aspect of the universality of HUPaT, knowledge in the human sciences is distinct from that of the natural sciences. This is a contrast to my claim that while the objects of knowing are distinct, the knowing process is not, because the scientific domain of causes is always mediated by hermeneutic understanding and, consequently, the differences between


knowing in a realm of causality and in one of agency recede into relative insignificance when compared to the profound ontological commonality rooted in the human knower. Neill says ambiguously “Gadamer is insistent that the ontological status of human actions necessarily entails understanding them in a different way from the natural world.”¹¹² But is this an ontological or epistemological commentary: what does ‘different’ qualify? Is it that human actions and the natural world are ontologically different (as they are), or is it that there are fundamentally different paths to understanding in those two different domains (as Gadamer holds, but I claim that there is not)?

There is also no doubt that Gadamer’s is a concern for truth. He makes this clear starting with the title of his main work—as well as the titles of its first two parts—and culminating five hundred pages later in its boldly overstated and surely ironic last line, which describes philosophical hermeneutics as a “discipline that guarantees truth.”¹¹³ His stated concern is “to seek the experience of truth that transcends the domain of scientific method wherever that experience is to be found, and to inquire into its legitimacy.”¹¹⁴ But despite this concern to examine truth and its hermeneutic expression, Gadamer has been criticised for a lack of lucidity concerning his conception of truth. If it is clear that his project is an examination and justification of truth as it manifests itself in the human sciences, the question remains: what is this conception of truth that he is using? Brice Wachterhauser suggests that it is puzzling that a work, which focuses in large part on truth, should “never discuss the question of truth in a direct and systematic manner.”¹¹⁵ For his part, Richard Bernstein says, “although the concept of truth is basic to Gadamer’s entire project of philosophic hermeneutics, it turns out to be one of the most elusive concepts in his work.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Gadamer, Truth and Method, 484.
¹¹⁴ Ibid., xxi.
¹¹⁵ Wachterhauser, “Must We Be What We Say? Gadamer on Truth in the Human Sciences,” 219.
I suggest, to the degree that the criticism is valid, that Gadamer assumes the relative transparency of the concept of truth without a great deal of explanation, and one possible defence might argue that it would be asking him to be disingenuous to enter into analytic discussions of truth or to define it in positive or propositional terms. Perhaps truth doesn’t become fully thematic because his view is that the truth of ‘truth’, like all truth, needs to reveal itself and can’t be thematised fully. While this is no excuse for vagueness—a danger Gadamer recognised in his own work117—it is a view with which I am sympathetic, arising as it does from acknowledging the tacit and provisional aspects of all knowledge: there is more to knowing than knowing will ever know. As Grondin comments, the provocativeness of Truth and Method “is its argument that a theory of understanding can never finally succeed in definitively getting a grasp on its ‘object.’”118 Nevertheless, Gadamer’s view of truth in his main work, and even more explicitly in contemporaneous writings, explicitly rests on Heidegger’s view of truth found in Being and Time.

Like Polanyi, part of Gadamer’s project involves radically redefining the epistemic landscape: he reflects later that his chief concern in Truth and Method “was to expand the concept of truth in such a way that we are not only left with the propositional concept of truth which claimed a monopoly over the concept of truth since Aristotle’s logic.”119 I will briefly outline aspects and implications of Gadamer’s understanding of truth below and then return in the next chapter to consider the criticisms levelled against him that his views are relativistic. What follows is mostly based on two articles, written at the time Gadamer was working on Truth and Method, in which he explicitly deals with the issue of the nature of truth in the human sciences: “Truth in the Human Sciences” was first published in 1954, while “What is Truth?”

118. Ibid., 284.
originates as an address a year later and one year before the completion of an original version of what would be published as *Truth and Method* in 1960.\textsuperscript{120}

*Truth and language*

For Gadamer, the most characteristic description of the nature of truth in the human sciences is unconcealedness (*Unverborgenheit*). In this, he follows his philosophical mentor, Heidegger, who, as we saw in chapter 3 looks to the Greek concept of *aletheia* for the roots of ‘truth’. So for Gadamer too, “truth is unconcealedness” but with the explicit emphasis that this unconcealedness “depends entirely on speech” because the human relationship with the world is “absolutely and fundamentally verbal in nature, and hence intelligible.”\textsuperscript{121} I will briefly elaborate the connection Gadamer sees between truth and language but, although I cautiously concur with him, HUPaT as I have described it does not depend on the essential nature of this link or Gadamer’s full ontology of language. It would be enough to claim that truth reveals itself in a way that while it is conditioned by language, may also occur without words in ways that I have described in my ‘retreat observations’ in chapter 3.

For Gadamer, “the meaning of speech [*die Rede*] is to put forward the unconcealed, to make manifest.”\textsuperscript{122} Of this relationship between speech and truth he says that “how things are with something appears as if for the first time when we speak about it.”\textsuperscript{123} Thus, it is this rootedness of truth in language that roots it in the particulars of time and space: “What we mean by truth, the revealedness and unconcealedness of things, thus has its own temporality and historicity.”\textsuperscript{124} Truth, then, is the revelation of the real, of “how things are with something,”\textsuperscript{125} however, it is more than what is, or even could be stated propositionally. It is reality coming to light in language, but it is also more than language can explicitly describe because meanings are multivalent and

\textsuperscript{121} Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 471.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 45-46.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 44.
because every word and every statement only finds its place connected to a world of meaning-making relationships: “that a proposition is more than the representation of a given objective content means, above all, that it belongs to the whole of a historical existence and that it is contemporaneous with everything that makes its presence felt in it.”

The contrast with science

The importance of speech highlights, for Gadamer, both that hermeneutics is “a universal aspect of philosophy and not just the methodological basis of the so-called human sciences,” but also the distinctness of his hermeneutics from an objectifying and abstracting characteristic of science, which lessens the legitimacy of other forms of knowledge. For Gadamer the contrast is between truth revealed in language or through method: “The objectifying procedures of natural science ... proved to be an abstraction when viewed from the medium that language is. Abstracted from the fundamental relation to the world that is given in the linguistic nature of our experience of it, science attempts to become certain about entities by methodically organizing its knowledge of the world.” A result of this disengagement is that science “condemns as heresy all knowledge that does not allow of this kind of certainty.”

As noted above, it is my view that while Gadamer is substantially correct in his analysis of knowing in the human sciences, he has made his argument all the more challenging by portraying knowing in the human sciences as antithetical to that of the natural sciences. Gadamer starts “Truth in the Human Sciences” pointing out that this contrast with the natural sciences makes it problematic to find a right understanding of the nature of the work of the human sciences: “What truth is for them, what disseminates from them, is difficult to make visible. … Instead of obvious or generally convincing results, the philosopher is called upon to bring to language the questionable [das Bedenkliche] and that which calls for thoughtful consideration [das Nachdenkliche]

126. Ibid.
that offers itself in the work of the human sciences to those who think.”\(^{128}\) This difficult nature of truth in the human sciences leads Gadamer to make comparisons with truth in the natural sciences,\(^{129}\) and for him there is no reciprocal sharing of the concept of truth, leaving his project fighting a rear-guard action to redress an imbalance in “the fact that truth has actually entered into such a privileged linking with science.”\(^{130}\)

In “What is truth?” Gadamer also contrasts the way of truth in the human sciences with that of natural science suggesting that the success of science and its procedures results in the limitation of the concept of truth to the scientific realm: the practical success of science seen in its power to control nature leads to the assumption that its (putative) method is the key to all knowledge and that science is “the last court of appeal and sole bearer of truth.”\(^{131}\) The result says Gadamer, once again thinking of positivist science, is that questions crucial to human existence are discredited: science “declares them meaningless. For only that which satisfies its own methods of discovering and testing truth has meaning for science. This uneasiness vis-à-vis science’s claim to truth makes itself felt pre-eminently in religion, philosophy, and issues of worldview. They are the courts convened by the skeptic against science to mark the boundaries of scientific specialization and methodical research in the face of the decisive questions of life.”\(^{132}\)

Again Polanyi and Gadamer agree on the problems arising from objectivist understandings of science but they have different solutions: the latter would chart out a special territory for the human sciences entrenching ‘the two cultures’ while the former would throw light on the true nature of the natural sciences thereby bridging the epistemological divide while at the same time recognising the differing objects of knowledge. So, the contrast with science as described by Gadamer makes it clear that the comparison is not with science as Polanyi and others construe it. Rather, Gadamer sees his defence of truth in hermeneutics as one enacted in the face of the validity of an

\(^{131}\) Ibid., 34-35.
\(^{132}\) Ibid., 35.
objective, methodological guaranteeing of truth in science. Unlike Polanyi, he doesn’t take the offensive against that view but instead, like Rorty, continues to battle the ideals of positivist science rather than to recognise the validity of the descriptions of those philosophers of science who unmask the myth of disengaged, rule-governed objectivity. So, for Gadamer, his reference above to “obvious or generally convincing results” does not point merely to differences of degree; rather, when compared to the natural sciences, the knowledge revealed by the human sciences is “knowledge of another kind and order,” and for him, the success of the former rests on the implementation of method: “in the methodical work of research in the natural sciences new insights are always increasing and this is due to the application of methods in science itself.” In a telling phrase that confuses methods and outcomes, Gadamer says, “the methods of the natural sciences do not encompass everything that is worth knowing, not least that which is most worth knowing, namely the final purposes that all control of nature and human beings must serve.” Surely the gist of what he means to claim here is true: that science is not the repository of all knowledge. But that is not what he says: he does not refer to scientific knowledge itself but to “the methods of the natural sciences” thereby eliding science and method and distinguishing human from natural sciences on the basis of differences in method rather than by the nature of the objects of enquiry.

In looking back decades later at his earlier work, Gadamer recognised that his view of the natural sciences was “one sided” and that he had left them out of the purview of his philosophical hermeneutics when writing *Truth and Method*. In the language of this thesis, HUFPaT is just as applicable a description of arriving at knowledge in the natural sciences as anywhere else and it is a Polanyian description of science in practice that can be recast in hermeneutic terms.

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134. Ibid., 26.
135. Ibid.
136. Ibid.
While Gadamer holds that the role of method in the human sciences is different to that of the natural sciences, he should not be understood to be saying that it is either negligible or negative in the former disciplines. His concern is not with disparaging method in itself but with the use that it is put to, and the status it aspires to, in different fields of enquiry. For example, he affirms the possibility of verifiability through method in the human sciences as a regulative ideal—we “must allow as valid the verifiability of all knowledge-claims as an ideal at the limits of possibility”—and he recognises that “the greatest and most fruitful achievements of the human sciences largely anticipate the ideal of verifiability.”138 But he also says that in the human sciences this ideal is seldom achieved and those who most strive for it “most often do not have the truly important things to say.”139 However, the place of method is limited in the human sciences and “concerns more the materials than the conclusions drawn from them” and in the end, in contrast to natural science and despite a recognition of this constrained place for method, Gadamer holds that “it is not the case … that [such] science is capable of securing truth through its methodology.”140

It is in this last quoted phrase that Gadamer’s real concern lies and from which the project of Truth and Method ensues. For him, understanding in the human sciences cannot be constrained to following a method because methods can never incorporate what he calls “the intuitive leap” by which the human sciences arrive at their conclusions: “the fruitfulness of a knowledge-claim in the human sciences appears to be more closely related to the intuition of the artist than the methodical spirit of research.”141 Gadamer invokes the nineteenth-century physicist Helmholtz as witness to the difference between the human and natural sciences and in Gadamer’s description, Helmholtz held that the human and natural sciences require distinct characteristics of the researcher: “everything pertaining to memory, imagination, tact, artistic sensibility,

139. Ibid., 39.
141. Ibid., 26-27.
and world experience that applies [in the human sciences] is obviously of another kind than the equipment which the researcher in the natural sciences requires.” This distinct approach is not inferior, nor invalid, but, in contrast to science, is one that “grows when one places oneself in the great tradition of human history.”

Against this view I invoke Polanyi and the philosophers of science of the twentieth century who railed against positivism and highlighted the social and personal aspects of the pursuit of science including the degree to which it depends on imagination, creativity, the intuitive leap that sees what others have failed to see in publically accessible data, and submission to, and understanding of, scientific tradition. The discovery of truth in the natural sciences rests on all the same interpretive tools and carries with it the same ‘burden’ of provisionality and finitude as knowing in other realms. And Polanyi’s description of apprenticeship and the place of scientific tradition and authority that we have already seen, is paralleled by Gadamer, except that the latter does not see it as applying to natural science. For him, “to stand in tradition and to heed it is clearly the way of truth that applies in the human sciences.” Polanyi would surely agree with Gadamer that “the true essence of authority is based much more on the claim that it is not unreasonable, indeed, that it can be a command of reason itself, to assume that the insight of others who are superior in other matters exceeds your own judgment. To obey authority means to have the insight that the other—and so also the other voices that resound from tradition and the past—can see something better than oneself.”

And the following description by Gadamer is, with a minor qualification indicated in square brackets, one that might well have been written by Polanyi as he describes the tacit elements, learned through experience and apprenticeship to the master, that are central to all science:

It is a question of tact that is acquired through unrelenting interaction with the subject matter, but it cannot be taught and demonstrated [explicitly, Polanyi would say, and perhaps Gadamer means]. Nevertheless … it is certain almost without exception that the experienced teacher is right and the beginner is not. Indeed, it is part of these particular conditions of truth that we have no absolute, certain standards, even when it comes to

142. Ibid., 27-28.
143. Ibid., 29.
144. Ibid., 28.
Another aspect and reason for the commandeering of truth by the natural sciences, which arises from the ideal of methodical verification is, in Gadamer’s view, found in the way the concept of truth as it is defined by those sciences assimilates the idea of proof as a necessary condition for truth. Gadamer rightly drives a wedge between truth and proof or certainty, capturing the essence of the problem when he says, “when verification—regardless of what form—primarily defines truth (veritas), then the standard with which knowledge is measured is no longer its truth but its certainty.” So, he says, since Descartes certainty was a condition of truth and considered “the authentic ethos of modern science,” and when truth and proof are essentially linked the human sciences are left defenceless because of the lack of “absolute, certain standards … to distinguish genuine accomplishment from empty pretension.” So, for Gadamer, and again in contrast to the natural sciences, truth must be separated from ideals of proof and certainty and remains provisional and (in my terms) involves fiduciary human judgments. In response, the reply of Polanyi (or Kuhn or Lakatos or another of those who recognise the social and personal elements of science) would simply affirm Gadamer and extend his thinking to the natural sciences: they might say, “but neither do the natural sciences have ‘absolute, certain standards’ to mark out knowledge. That is an empty positivist pretension now well-recognised by astute philosophers of science.”

In conclusion, Gadamer has painted a picture of understanding in the human sciences that is magisterial and convincing. It accords with HUFPaT and has proven its worth as the authoritative view, dominating discussion of such matters since the publication of Truth and Method. But its overwhelming weakness, which Gadamer later recognised, was that it accepted a positivist view of the natural sciences as engaged in method-governed pursuit of verifiable certainty. In doing so Gadamer entrenched a divide that it is one of the tasks of this thesis to begin to overcome.

145. Ibid.
Chapter 6
The Spectre of Relativisms

In previous chapters I have outlined an approach to truth and knowing—HUFPaT—that I claim is faithful to both Gadamer’s and Polanyi’s views of the knowing process in their different areas of concern. However, even if my merging of philosophical hermeneutics and Polanyi’s ‘personal knowledge’ is accepted, such a view will be criticised as relativist by those who have challenged Gadamer and Polanyi separately on this score. In this chapter, and before concluding this thesis, I will respond to the possible criticism that, due to a debilitating form of relativism, HUFPaT fails to offer a valid description of what I have called an approach to robust truth. My defence of HUFPaT’s robust outcomes will consist more in justifying why relativism is an accusation that misses the mark than by defending HUFPaT on the terms set by those who lay charges of relativism. In effect, I suggest that the relativist charge is against the provisionality that HUFPaT claims is entailed by a hermeneutic view of understanding. So while both Gadamer and Polanyi are realists with respect to truth, the credibility of their positions is not compromised by being (correctly) charged with a form of cognitive relativism (or what Eduardo Echeverria calls sophisticated relativism1) when that term is understood in an appropriately nuanced way.

To affirm that there are various competing perspectives on how things are and that there is no ultimate justification that avoids provisionality by guaranteeing the truth of claims about how things are, amounts to what I take to fall under descriptions such as perspectival realism or epistemic or cognitive relativism. But to acknowledge the foregoing is, at the same time, to contend that there is a truth about how things are (on which there can be various perspectives). It is to allow for a distinction, essential to serious conversation, between ‘true’ and ‘believed to be true’; in short, it is to allow for the possibility of being mistaken. The oft-quoted story of the blind men, who, investigating different parts of the elephant, come to different conclusions about its

nature, depends for its force on the presence of the elephant that is real, and known
more fully, although not exhaustively, by the narrator than by the blind men; it is an
example of perspectival realism. In fact, to mix parable with metaphor, the elephant in
the relativist room is that the perspectivist description of the blind men is dependent on
the real elephant and the story implies neither a total epistemic incommensurability nor
a radical ontological relativity (notwithstanding the ontological dimension of HUFPaT,
which entails that in some senses the ‘elephant’ too is constituted as part of each blind
man’s ‘world’). It merely highlights the claim of HUFPaT that truth arises in communal
dialogue as interlocutors present their perspectives on the common object of discourse,
whether that be an elephant, anthropogenic contributions to climate change, valid
meanings of Macbeth, or the Apostle Paul’s view of the law. Notwithstanding further
discussion of ontological matters, the moot point is, as both Gadamer and Polanyi have
made clear, whether, having recognised some sort of relativism entailed by their views,
convincing justification or legitimation can be offered for claims to have encountered
truth.

Before turning directly to questions of relativism I will highlight similarities
between Gadamer and Polanyi that I have claimed show that both their views can be
substantially subsumed under HUFPaT. I will then briefly outline the sorts of
accusations of relativism that Gadamer and Polanyi have been charged with before I go
on to describe the lie of the relativist land in order to make it clear where I believe
HUFPaT is located. I will finish by offering a justification of why HUFPaT does not fall
foul of a problematic sort of relativism.

6.1 Revisiting Gadamer and Polanyi

We have seen that both Gadamer and Polanyi describe the nature of knowing in
ways that redefine the concept of knowledge by including tacit, human components that
can never be exhaustively identified. So they both reject the possibility of an
Archimedean vantage point from which to observe the world unfettered by prejudice or
presuppositions. Both authors highlight not only the inevitability but also the necessity
of all thinking being entrenched in history and tradition, and of the individual being
dependent on submission to the authority of a community and subject to their own pre-
judgments without which thinking could not begin. Truth, for both Polanyi and
Gadamer, is always a provisional claim arising from dialogue and described by
Gadamer as the ongoing event of the fusion of horizons. The Cartesian dream of finding
certainty by casting aside all dubitable presuppositions has been thoroughly debunked
and for those who insist that ‘knowledge’ must fit that model the end point is some form
of scepticism, or radical relativism or indeterminacy. However, in distinction from
traditional epistemology, Gadamer and Polanyi work within another paradigm, which
arises from their observations and descriptions of knowledge in the making in their
respective fields. In doing so, they justify holding on to the baby of robust truth while
throwing out the bath water of Cartesian hopes of certainty or guarantees of knowledge
claims, dependent as such hopes are on an illusory absolute objectivity and its
disengaged human knower, which is based on a flawed metaphysics that divides object
and subject. So, instead of entering the regressive cycle of fighting the phantoms that
haunt pre-critical belief, such as ‘prejudice’ or ‘provisionality’, they recognise them
and, in the language of Bruno Latour, embrace them as allies to be co-opted in the
search for truth.2

While neither author is against method, they both elaborate their theories in
conscious opposition to an Enlightenment confidence in a formalised method as a
guarantor of truth. They recognise the intrinsically finite nature of human exploration of
truth and both insist on an intellectual humility—all knowledge is provisional—that
challenges naive Enlightenment optimism and mastery, which, in its positivist extremes,
claims that all that cannot be mastered is meaningless. Polanyi highlights the
impossibility of formalising the rules of scientific discovery and the futility of arriving
at “strict criteria of truth and strict procedures for arriving at the truth,”3 and he
emphasises personal agency including the fiduciary commitment and the creativity of
the scientist. He says for example: “Desisting henceforth from the vain pursuit of a
formalized scientific method, commitment accepts in its place the person of the scientist

as the agent responsible for conducting and accrediting scientific discoveries. The scientist’s procedure is of course methodical. But his methods are but the maxims of an art which he applies in his own original way to the problem of his own choice.”

And for his part, while Gadamer is happy to talk loosely of procedure — “a procedure that we in fact exercise whenever we understand anything” — and “methodologically conscious understanding” that, through checking, will lead to acquiring “right understanding from the things themselves,” he, like Polanyi, is firmly against a trust in method to guarantee truth. Gadamer talks of the task of hermeneutics in the following (previously quoted) terms, although, as I have already alluded to, he is too prone to assume that the natural sciences are governed by strict method.

“Ultimately,” he says, “it has always been known that the possibilities of rational proof and instruction do not fully exhaust the sphere of knowledge. … We … must … [show] the difficulties that result from the application of the modern concept of method to the human sciences. Let us therefore consider how this tradition became so impoverished and how the human sciences’ claim to know something true came to be measured by a standard foreign to it—namely the methodical thinking of modern science.”

Given the way that both authors reconstrue the epistemological landscape and recognise that the implications of their respective reconstruals go far beyond the domains from which they launch their thinking, Polanyi’s words are an apt description of Gadamer too as the former describes his “alternative ideal of knowledge quite generally,” and in his telling phraseology (that again could be applied to Gadamer), which draws out the crucial distinction between truth and what is believed to be true, he says that the purpose of his work is, “to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be

4. Ibid.
5. Gadamer, Truth and Method, 270.
6. Ibid., 272.
7. Ibid., 21.
false,”9 and “to enter avenues of legitimate access to reality from which objectivism debars us.”10

We have seen that for Gadamer understanding is entrenched in and presupposes a host of unexamined assumptions or beliefs. We take in our surroundings, make sense of history or the Mona Lisa, or read Dostoevsky without a self-conscious attempt to make our presuppositions explicit. The object of our understanding is tacitly intelligible to us, and understanding is just this tacit ability to make sense of the world. It is not something mastered by method or rules but acquired in practice as we listen and trust others doing the same. Note that in this description of Gadamer I have deliberately used ‘tacit’ to describe aspects of his hermeneutics, drawing on Polanyi’s discussion of tacit knowledge summed up in his catch phrase, “we can know more than we can tell.”11 Like Gadamer’s ‘prejudice’ Polanyi goes to great lengths to show that tacit knowledge is ubiquitous and has radical implications for epistemology as it overturns “the ideal of exact science” which is both misleading and results in “devastating fallacies.”12 As we have seen, for Polanyi the indispensability of tacit thought to all knowledge means that an ideal that would eliminate the personal elements from the knowledge enterprise would in fact “aim at the destruction of all knowledge.”13 For Gadamer such tacit prejudgments are a precondition for understanding and “constitute the historical reality of [a person’s] being.”14 And for Polanyi all knowing and conscious awareness involves an “extensive set of a-critically accepted beliefs,” which, in their being committed to on trust, reveals “the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality.”15

While Gadamer’s discussion is in terms of the role of prejudice and of tradition, the conceptual link with Polanyi becomes clearer when Gadamer speaks of the sort of authority that can be a valid source of truth: “Authority … rests on acknowledgment and hence on an act of reason itself which, aware of its own limitations, trusts to the

9. Ibid., 214.
10. Ibid., 292.
11. Polanyi, Tacit Dimension, 4.
12. Ibid., 20.
13. Ibid. Italics added.
better insight of others. … The prejudices that [the teacher, the superior, the expert] implant are legitimized by the person who presents them. But in this way they become prejudices not just in favor of a person but a content, since they effect the same disposition to believe something that can be brought about in other ways—e.g., by good reasons.”16 For his part, Polanyi too is clear about the role of authority and tradition in science. He says, “the knowledge comprised by science is not known to any single person. Indeed, nobody knows more than a tiny fragment of science well enough to judge its validity and value at first hand. For the rest he has to rely on views accepted at second hand on the authority of a community of people accredited as scientists.”17 There is no escaping the fact that only a truncated view of human knowing omits incorporating the fiduciary commitment involved in entrusting or submitting oneself to the authority of others. “No practice has accomplished the rejection of testimony and authority,”18 says Shapin, and, in Jennifer Lackey’s words, “our dependence on testimony is as deep as it is ubiquitous. We rely on the reports of others for our beliefs about the food we eat, the medicine we ingest, the products we buy, the geography of the world, discoveries in science, historical information, and many other areas that play crucial roles in both our practical and intellectual lives.”19

In both Gadamer and Polanyi we have seen a turning away from an incoherent ideal of detached objectivity as they challenge the norms of the received view of human knowledge. But in doing so they do not merely move away from the certainty pole towards scepticism or relativism—a move made by those such as Rorty who retain foundationalist understandings of ‘knowledge’ but claim such hopes are either incoherent or, at least, impossible to achieve. However, both Gadamer and Polanyi redefine knowledge in a way that is fallibilist or provisional but which is, as I will argue, not open to damaging relativist critiques, based as they are on foundationalist

17. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 163.
assumptions. The question that then arises with respect to Polanyi and Gadamer is not whether they are relativists—in one sense they are—but whether they have offered a solution (which responds to those who charge them with relativism) to the problem of the nature of justification in their descriptions of human knowing. This is the task both authors set for themselves: in Gadamer’s words, which could be reconstrued to fit Polanyi’s epistemology, the ubiquity of prejudices or pre-judgments raises his “fundamental epistemological question,” to wit, “What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others, which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?”

It is clear why those who expect more of human knowledge claims than Gadamer or Polanyi can offer are likely to suggest that these authors lay themselves open to charges of relativism. Both reject epistemological objectivism and the possibility of a God’s-Eye View, both recognise that reason is at least partially historically and culturally constituted, both lay claim to robust truth, yet both reject the possibility of a rule-based method for guaranteeing that truth, and so both accept the provisionality of all knowledge. But where does that leave them with respect to the relativist charge?

6.2 Charges of relativism

Eduardo Echeverria criticises Polanyi’s epistemology arguing that he fails to clarify the link between epistemic justification on the one hand and truth on the other. While this criticism is in part valid, it does not carry the significance that Echeverria gives it, as I will clarify in my later discussion of the options open to Polanyi and Gadamer after they have rejected any possibility of guaranteeing truth claims. According to Echeverria, Polanyi is an epistemic relativist because he holds that “justified belief is dependent on epistemic context.” But Echeverria also recognises that Polanyi is a realist, holding that “truth as a reality is distinguishable from [what]
one is justified in holding to be true.”

“In short,” says Echeverria, “implied in [Polanyi’s] reflections on truth is the doctrine of verification-transcendent truth, which asserts that propositions have truth value independent of our capacity to know what warrants our acceptance of them.” While Echeverria’s understanding of Polanyi is substantially correct, his conclusion is overly demanding because he criticises Polanyi on the grounds of what the latter says can’t be done. For Polanyi (and for Gadamer and for HUFPaT), clarifying precisely the link between justification and truth is not possible because that link is founded on intangible and ultimately inexplicable elements that leave all knowledge claims resting on provisional human judgments.

In a similar vein to Echeverria, Struan Jacobs makes the point that it is not sufficient for authors like Polanyi simply to assert their belief in a universal truth. Jacobs, like Echeverria, recognises that “Polanyi is not a relativist as regards the ideal of truth.” But Polanyi also holds that there can be a logical gap between belief systems, saying that scientists from different schools, “think differently, speak a different language, live in a different world.” According to Jacobs, this view, later popularised by Thomas Kuhn, and known as the incommensurability thesis, results in relativism, and if Polanyi is to avoid the charge of cognitive relativism, he needs to provide “good reasons for cognitive choices.” That is, according to Jacobs’ reading, Polanyi’s choice between belief systems is not founded on good reasons. So, when seen from the perspective of traditional expectations about knowledge, it seems that Polanyi’s provisionalist position is akin to what Jacobs sees as a problematic form of cognitive relativism.

Bernstein’s criticism of Gadamer is similar to those described above of Polanyi, in his suggestion that Gadamer does not offer sufficient justification for claims to truth: although Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics contributes to the task of

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22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 831.


moving beyond the polarity between objectivism and relativism “it does not entirely succeed in charting [that] course.” For Bernstein, Gadamer fails to make explicit his “communicative understanding of truth” and Bernstein points to the lack of clarity about the meaning and validation of truth that my thesis attempts to correct. Bernstein also correctly points to Gadamer’s failure to integrate his universalist pretensions for his views with his view of science as dominated by method: “Typically, when dealing with hermeneutical understanding, Gadamer speaks of it as an ‘entirely different type of knowledge and truth’ from that which is yielded by Method and science. But he has never developed a full-scale analysis of the type of knowledge and truth that he takes to be characteristic of Method and the natural sciences. It is never quite clear, then, what is common to these different forms of knowledge and truth.” Bernstein goes on to say that there are conflicting tendencies in Gadamer: with respect to the contrast and, as I too contend, “given the strong claims that Gadamer makes about the universality of hermeneutics, there is something misleading about this contrast. For if understanding underlies all human inquiry and knowledge, then what Gadamer labels Method must itself be hermeneutical.”

I suggest that the criticisms described above of both authors are not overwhelming once it has been accepted that HUFPaT is a valid description of human knowing practices. Having accepted that this is the case, these sorts of criticisms simply highlight the need for a hermeneutic approach to truth and knowledge to do two things: firstly it must defend the view that most serious charges of relativism miss the mark when aimed at hermeneutics, and, secondly, it must continue the conversation about justification in post-Heideggerian ‘epistemology’ that allows of no guarantees of truth and no final separation of the knowing subject from the object known. The first is a task I attempt to conclude in the bulk of this final chapter. The second remains for further discussion once the would-be foundationalist critic is convinced that the first has been

28. Ibid., 168.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
satisfactorily achieved. I will conclude this thesis with further comments about the ‘human epistemological condition’ in the light of the ontological turn, but while Gadamer and Polanyi, along with my exposition of them, have progressed towards showing what justification consists in after the hermeneutic turn, there is much further work to be done. The primary aim of this thesis consists in arguing that all knowing falls under a HUFPaTian description and that HUFPaT isn’t susceptible to the standard relativist charges.

6.3 Relativisms

In order to clarify the lie of the relativist land I am going to propose a way of describing the challenge to HUFPaT from those who would charge it with relativism, after which I will make it clear why such challenges substantially miss the mark. I will also suggest that there is often a ‘fallacy of ontological entailment’—a FOE—at work in serious charges of relativism and that this FOE makes these charges appear more significant than they are. I propose that it is common sense to recognise that knowledge claims are relative to people and circumstances but that to draw more significant conclusions about access to truth or about the nature of reality requires unsubstantiated leaps from that description to either pessimistic epistemic conclusions or to absurd ontological conclusions. I will also suggest that the charge of relativism only carries weight as a serious criticism in a context where certainty is the ideal epistemic norm.

I will consider relativism as it is used in two broad ways that are often unnecessarily confused and, in order to avoid the ambiguities of using familiar descriptors, I will refer to them as R1 and R2 relativism, which might loosely be referred to as the descriptive sense and the normative or positive sense, the first of which, I suggest, amounts almost to common sense and the second of which frequently amounts to non-sense. The common-sense truth that R1 relativism points to is a descriptive one with epistemological implications and can be summed up by saying that all judgments are human judgments made with the finitude, fallibility, and cultural and historical conditionness that ‘human’ implies; there is no neutrality; there is no disengaged God’s-Eye View. Even if the failure of traditional epistemology along with
the anthropology revealing differing ‘conceptual schemes’ were not sufficient evidence, the ontological turn of Heidegger, taken up by Gadamer, shows that this form of relativism is not contingent but is a necessary entailment of the ontological conditions of human knowing. But ‘relativism’ is also used (mostly in the hands of its critics) to point to or claim something else beyond the implications of a HUFPaTian ontology: R2 relativism makes the often-nonsensical claim that some features of the world, whether conceptual, moral, or material, are totally humanly constituted.

At this stage I should clarify that I am leaving aside those judgments that are indeed about things in the world—hence making them amenable to judgments of true or false—but which also clearly depend on my or our beliefs and practices. In that class I include such judgments as indexical ones (for example that “Sydney is to the north”) or social facts (“he is a philosopher”) and other facts that are exhaustively constituted by human practices. Another way of expressing this distinction between R1 and R2 relativism is the way it is manifested in discussing truth. R1 relativism is relativism about what people believe to be true, while R2 relativism concerns what is actually true, irrespective of whether we humans have any means of grasping or adequately describing that truth. Clearly at this stage I am assuming that, along the lines of the discussion in previous chapters, it is sensible to speak of ‘robust truth’ and, without entering into further comment about the correspondence theory of truth, I’m assuming that our descriptions are true if in some way they correctly describe how the world, independent of our thinking about it, actually is. So, for example, I am assuming that if the human race had never come into being or had never come to the point of reflection upon the world, then it would still make sense to speak of that world having characteristics. Furthermore, in this discussion of relativism and until the final section of this chapter, I am also passing over the ontological implications of our Being-in-the-world and I’m not using truth in the Heideggerian sense of unconcealment. In other words, for the moment, I’m dealing with relativism as described by those who would make that charge; I’m taking the description of the ‘problem’ on its own terms.

The question that arises for the person who sees a ‘problem of relativism’ beyond merely the recognition of differing opinions concerns the connection between
R1 and R2 views. So the charge is along the following lines: 1. given the diversity of beliefs, and 2. in the absence of suitable guaranteed and agreed means of arbitrating between beliefs, then 3. a problematic form of relativism ensues. Consequently, the demand of the critic is that those like Gadamer and Polanyi, who offer views of knowledge that do not conform to the expectations of traditional epistemology, should demonstrate to the critic’s satisfaction what the suitable means of arbitrating between beliefs are.

It seems to me that there are two directions to move from descriptive R1 relativism to further conclusions: the first is to take R1 relativism’s empirical claim of a diversity of incompatible beliefs as evidence for an apparently valid ontological claim that either all or all but one of those views are false; let’s call this the R1f argument. The second direction is to take R1’s empirical diversity as evidence that all or most of those views are true in some sense of the word, but one which no longer makes universal claims. I will call this the R1t argument and its conclusion is R2 relativism, to which we will return.

The R1f argument is relatively straightforward and apparently valid, arguing that in the light of a diversity of mutually contradictory views, either all or all but one of them are false. So, for example, culture or person A believes moral code MA is true in a universal sense, culture or person B believes moral code MB is true and culture or person C believes in moral code MC, also in a universal sense. And given that MA, MB and MC are incompatible, the conclusion of the R1f argument is that at least two of those three views are false. This argument is clear enough and offers obvious grounds for further discussion, but whichever way that discussion goes, no further relativistic claims arise apart from the descriptive relativism of R1, which recognises that different people or cultures come to different moral conclusions. To reiterate: the fact that arbitration between MA and MB and MC might be difficult is not relativism; it merely highlights the difficulties of epistemological justification. These epistemological implications arise out of accepting the R1f argument and then discussing how one might decide which if any of the diverse claims is correct. If the conclusion is that there is no ultimate way of arbitrating between them to guarantee the truth of one or other, then R1
descriptive relativism will have led to an epistemic or cognitive relativism that says effectively that none can claim overwhelming precedence over another in their truth claims. So this conclusion, based on R1 relativism, is that the truth cannot be known with certainty. Therefore this is a view that links the relativity of beliefs, not to the relativity of truth, but to the provisionality of truth claims.

However, R1 relativism can also lead to ontological conclusions—and here the FOE appears for the first time. The first form of the fallacy of ontological entailment occurs when a diversity of beliefs leads to the conclusion that all those beliefs are wrong or simply meaningless—this is the extreme and invalid version of the R1f argument, which I will call the nonexistence conclusion. I suggest that many people agree with this argument in some cases but not in others (perhaps driven by confirmation bias more than clear thinking). Whatever the thought processes might be, for many, the fact of diversity of belief about, for example, the question of abortion or morality in general leads them to the conclusion that there are no truths to be had about the morality of abortion or, with respect to morality in general, that there is no sense in speaking of universal moral norms. Similarly, diversity about the nature of God or the gods leads some to believe that there are no gods. In Nietzsche’s words combining the two examples: “Moral judgement has this in common with religious judgement, that it believes in realities that do not exist.” It is worth emphasising that the conclusions, based on diversity of beliefs, that there are no gods or that there is no absolute morality are not relativistic conclusions: they are absolute or universal claims arising from the empirical evidence of diversity of opinion that I have called R1 relativism. So the first FOE is the weak inference from a diversity of beliefs to the falsity (or meaninglessness) of all those beliefs.

The R1t argument on the other hand, is one that results in R2 relativism as it moves from the same claims by A and B and C (thought of as cultures or individuals) that their respective (and apparently competing) beliefs are universally true, to a conclusion that they are all true in some sense. However, what can this possibly mean

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beyond what R1 relativism asserts (that there is in fact a diversity of beliefs)? The conclusion of the R1t argument is often expressed in the language of ‘true for’. In an R1 sense it is clear that any belief is true for the holder of that view; it adds nothing to R1 by saying that moral code A is true for person or culture A etc. ‘True for A’ is simply a truism if it says nothing more than R1 asserts on the basis of ethnographic or other empirical investigation. “MA is true for A” in that case is simply a confusing way of saying that “A believes MA is true” which is to say that “A believes MA.” However, if one blurs the distinction between ‘is believed to be true’ (a contingent epistemic claim) and ‘is true’ (an ontological claim), as true for’ language easily does, then ‘is believed to be true’ no longer has any meaning apart from ‘is true’. And it is the blurring of this distinction that leads to confusion between relativisms and the slide from common sense to nonsense—a slide I describe as a FOE, which is committed because of the perceived unacceptable conjunction of provisionality with robust truth claims.

To speak of moral relativism sensibly is to speak of R1 relativism, which is most clearly expressed as the empirical fact that there is a diversity of moral beliefs. If this diversity is taken as evidence for the Nietzschean nonexistence conclusion through invoking some sort of FOE then the result is an ontological conclusion. But this is not yet R2 relativism because the ontological claim is not “a culture approves M, therefore M is good”; it is a claim that asserts, independently of cultural beliefs, that, there is no good—to quote Nietzsche, “there are no moral facts whatsoever”33—and so it amounts to a claim that R1 moral relativism is all that there is to be said about morality. The corollary of such a view is that the culture holding M as a universal truth is simply mistaken. So if R1 is all that can be said about morality, then it is a way of pointing not to a diversity of relativist true beliefs but to the falsity of all universal moral beliefs (where universal is understood as beliefs made with Polanyian universal intent).

Hence, while relativism might sound accommodating of a diversity of views, in fact it asserts one of three things. It might claim, following the R1f argument that “all but one and perhaps all of the set of diverse but mutually contradictory beliefs are

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33. Ibid.
wrong.” Or a minor FOE is committed by inferring that “all of that set of beliefs are wrong.” So, in either of these two cases, the ‘relativist’ argument results in an absolute (not relativist) claim that, in the field in question, there is only one or perhaps there are no correct truth claims—this is hardly a novel conclusion. Or, to put it another way, while there is a distinction between ‘believed true’ and ‘true’, in fact all or all but one of the views that are believed to be true are in fact false. The third and nonsensical conclusion, which involves committing a major FOE, is when R1 relativism leads to the R2 conclusion that all the set of beliefs in question are true in some sense. The second and third assertions both involve the FOE but the third is a serious FOE indeed, playing havoc, as it does, with the meaning of ‘true’ and resulting in the total ‘belief dependence’ of the world.

Before returning to Gadamer, Polanyi, and HUFPaT, I will cite an example of a lack of clarity between R1 and R2 relativism. In her 2004 book, Relativism, in the Routledge Problems of Philosophy series, Baghramian defines relativism “at its most basic [as] the view that cognitive, moral or aesthetic norms and values are dependent on the social or conceptual systems that underpin them, and consequently a neutral standpoint for evaluating them is not available to us.” 34 (I take this as a statement of R1 relativism, but which apparently entails cognitive relativism based on the lack of a neutral standpoint.) In particular Baghramian defines moral relativism as follows: “Moral relativists claim that the truth or falsity, the appropriateness or inappropriateness of an ethical belief, is relative to its socio-historical background and that moral beliefs cannot be assessed independently of their social framework.” 35 However, what does it mean to say “the truth of a belief is relative to or dependent on such and such”? Is it deliberately ambiguous between R1 and R2—between the descriptive and the normative? Does it refer to what is true or to what is believed to be true? (Or is it begging the question by assuming there is no distinction?)

Baghramian helpfully lists various philosophical and cultural factors that have contributed to arguments for some form of relativism, but, I suggest, to draw anything

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34. Maria Baghramian, Relativism (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 1.
35. Ibid., 6-7.
more than R1 conclusions from the following “factors” is to commit a FOE. The philosophical factors listed by Baghramian are the following: the *context dependence* of some statements (for example, “It’s raining here, now,” but, says Baghramian, an unconvincing argument because indexicals like ‘now’ can be made explicit and context-free); the necessary *mind-dependence* of all thinking and theorising, which, she says, leads to the claim that it does not make sense to speak of reality as it is in itself apart from mind-dependent judgments; *perspectivalism*, which recognises that all judgment and experience are perspectives and that no neutral viewpoint is possible (with relativism following, says Baghramian, if differing perspectives are assumed to be non-convergent); *philosophical Manichaeism*, which is committed to dichotomies such as objective-subjective, mind-world and factual-evaluative—dualisms wherein the contrast leads to a view that the second term in each case is relative (so: moral relativism, subjectivism, and conceptual relativism respectively); and the *underdetermination of theory by data* which means that multiple theories might equally account for given empirical data. Baghramian also lists the following cultural factors that contribute to relativistic views: the *collapse of certainties* in various fields of thought, which leads to the view that there may be no means of adjudicating between views; the *cultural diversity* brought to light especially by 20th century anthropology; the prominence of *social-scientific explanations* for beliefs; and the *imperative of tolerance*, which serves as an implicit moral argument in favour of relativism because relativism is egalitarian and liberating in its unseating of the dominant paradigm including Western ethnocentrism and the Enlightenment intellectual legacy.

Notwithstanding Baghramian’s comprehensive list of factors that are thought to contribute to relativist conclusions, almost all of them amount to a form of R1 relativism but say nothing interesting about the possibility of robust truth claims except that they might be hard to come by and cannot be guaranteed; in short, truth claims will always remain provisional. (There are two exceptions: “philosophical Manichaeism”, which, however, conflicts with the hermeneutic rejection of stark dualisms such as that between subject and object; and the spurious “ought-is” argument that the moral virtue of tolerance leads to conclusions about what is true in non-moral realms.) Additionally,
to appeal to any of Baghramian’s factors as empirically true runs the risk of self-contradiction if used as an argument for a view that relativises the class of factor in question. Finally, such arguments only count in favor of a more significant form of relativism than R1 for the person still committed to the view that truth and knowledge are defined in terms of the possibility of Cartesian guarantees.

Baghramian also offers this longer description of relativism, which, highlights the ambiguity between R1 and R2 relativism:

Relativists propose that predicates such as ‘is true’, ‘is right’, ‘is rational’ have the apparent logical form of one-place predicates, but that a correct analysis or understanding of them would show that they are in fact elliptical for two-place predicates such as ‘is true relative to’, ‘is right according to’, etc. In general, according to the relativist, a statement of the form ‘A is P’, within a given domain (e.g., science, ethics, metaphysics), is elliptical for the statement ‘A is P in relation to C’, where A stands for an assertion, belief, judgement or action, P stands for (normative) predicates such as ‘is true’, ‘is beautiful, [sic] ‘is right’, ‘is rational’ [sic] ‘is logical’, ‘is known’, etc., and C stands for a specific culture, framework, language, belief-system, etc. … Relativists argue that, contrary to common assumption, all judgements are context-dependent. … The relativist, in effect, is claiming that she is uncovering the correct logical form of a class of statements that have been misunderstood and misapplied by non-relativists.”

What is not clear in this description is whether it is a description of R1 relativism (“all judgements are context-dependent”) or R2 relativism (the truth of all judgments is context-dependent). Is it merely pointing to the truism that every truth claim is made by a human person embedded in a linguistic, cultural world, or is it saying more?

To labour the point, and to take a less contentious but analogous example, let’s assume that two cultures have overwhelmingly strong but distinct beliefs about the moon. One believes it to be made of green cheese, but the other knows it is pavlova. R1 or common-sense relativism holds that whether a culture believes the moon to be sweet or savoury is relative to, or depends on, the cultural norms relating to beliefs about the moon. This is a descriptive statement and by now rather banal in the wake of twentieth-century anthropology. R2 or nonsensical relativism claims, via the R1t argument, that if a culture holds such a view, then the moon truly is made of pavlova while if another culture deems it so, then the moon is in fact also made of green cheese. R1f on the other

36. Ibid., 4-5.
hand says that both or one of the claims is false so in fact does not lead to a relativist
claim of its own beyond recognising the R1 claim as true. Let’s return to Baghramian’s
statement in question, which says that relativism is the view that the truth of beliefs
depends on socio-historical background. While on the face of it, that sounds like an
example of R2 relativism (after all, it says that “truth … depends on socio-historical
background”) in fact it can only be made comprehensible by assuming it is a shorthand
version of the R1 descriptive claim that might be expressed loosely as: “Relativism is
the view that what is deemed to be true within a culture depends on socio-historical
background.” Understood in this R1 way, the claim is one about epistemic norms and
the fact that they are conditioned by culture—and, according to philosophical
hermeneutics, R1 is ontologically necessary rather than a contingent limitation of
current epistemology. Put another way, R1 is the claim, central to philosophical
hermeneutics for example, that there is no unprejudiced, neutral, Archimedean, super-
cultural ‘view from nowhere in particular’, from which to make truth claims. This is the
sense in which I will use the terms cognitive or epistemic relativism and it is a sense
that can be validly applied to Gadamer’s, Polanyi’s, and HUFPaT’s universal but
provisional claims to truth.

However, this form of cognitive relativism is not equivalent to saying that all
perspectives are equal or that (by committing a FOE) truth is either inaccessible or
meaningless beyond the ‘true for’ sense. As we will see, the claim that all views are in
some sense ‘equal’ is to attempt a judgment from outside of any particular view; the
holder of any view or epistemic framework implicitly claims, in their ‘holding’ it, that
theirs is a superior view to all others. And, if the holder of such a view also accepts a
Heideggerian/Gadamerian view of the entrenched human subject, then while they
believe their truth claims are ‘superior’ they also hold that view provisionally. When
experts disagree, it is not because their various positions are in some sense equal; it is
because each view is believed to be superior by the expert that holds it.

In summary, the (non-trivial R1) relativist argument, in the hands of the
absolutist who would criticise Gadamer or Polanyi or HUFPaT, offers as its reasons in
favor of relativism, only 1. the diversity of beliefs; 2. the lack of overwhelming reasons
for one position, and possibly; 3. a moral argument in favor of tolerance. But none of these make more than the weak epistemic relativist case that there are no overwhelming reasons for guaranteeing that, for example, Western reasoning including the natural and human sciences, for the most part, leads to robust truth. Furthermore, 1. assumes knowledge of how things are (diverse etc.) while 2. lays an expectation of Cartesian indubitability on those such as Gadamer and Polanyi who refuse to shoulder such burdens in their respective ‘epistemologies’. To say there are no external standards to judge between belief systems is to beg the question. Each system claims it is the external standard but can’t prove it to the satisfaction of the absolutist. For example, Hollis and Lukes credit well-known relativists central to the “strong programme” in the sociology of knowledge, Barnes and Bloor, with claiming that “there are no objective, external epistemic standpoints and that explanation is therefore symmetrical.”

However, that view too makes a truth claim that assumes a better perspective than others and that belies Barnes and Bloor’s stated position that “there is no sense … to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such.” For them, because there are no Archimedean or context-free rational norms, rationality plays no explanatory role in scientific beliefs because there is no fundamental distinction between rationally and irrationally held beliefs: “They do not fall into two different natural kinds, which make different sorts of appeal to the human mind, or stand in a different relationship to reality, or depend for their credibility on different patterns of social organization. Hence the relativist conclusion that they are to be explained in the same way.”

6.4 ‘Good reasons’ in epistemology after method

I return now to the charges of cognitive relativism in order to consider more what the precise nature and implications of this challenge are. I do so by reflecting on the criticism of Gadamer and Polanyi (and by extension of HUFPaT), which is

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38. Ibid., 27-28.
exemplified in Jacob’s charge that Polanyi does not provide “good reasons for cognitive choices.”39 I suggest that the charge can be viewed two ways, one of which amounts to the complaint of a foundationalist that a view such as HUFPaT must be foundational if it is to be taken seriously, and the other of which amounts to saying that, on Polanyi’s view, for example, one person’s reasons are as good as another’s and there is no final way of deciding between truth claims because there is no Archimedean point from which to weigh them. In other words, one interpretation of not providing “good reasons” for a claim says that there are no good reasons to decide between systems or epistemic frameworks or conceptual schemes, while the other says that one person has their (claimed “good”) reasons but recognises that others too believe that their reasons are good ones and concludes that this impasse means no reasons are in fact “good” ones because none can be shown to be better than any other.

But HUFPaT lays claim to a third more nuanced ‘cognitive relativist’ position: HUFPaT is based on the dual affirmation of those such as Polanyi and Gadamer that, on the one hand, they do have good reasons for their claims but that, on the other hand, they also recognise that others may not accept those reasons and that, when dialogue has reached an impasse, there is nothing the claimant can do or say that would guarantee agreement. So, from a HUFPaT perspective, the challenge to show “good reasons” leads to a legitimation regress as it suffers the same fate as the original challenge to show good reasons: it amounts to a demand to show further good reasons for thinking that one’s reasons are good. And so on. “Good reasons” is thus forced into a meta-argument by a Cartesian demand for guarantees, which only accepts as ‘good’ those reasons that the demandant agrees with. And in the end ‘guarantee’ can mean no more than that all conversation partners are in agreement.

On this view, the sort of cognitive relativism that HUFPaT entails is not that one view is as good as another; it is that one HUFPaTian claimant (H1) thinks that their view is superior while another claimant (H2) thinks theirs is superior. But for a third party (Jacobs for example) to say that this amounts to there being no good reasons for

one or other claim involves that third party in assuming a super-framework perspective—a God’s-Eye View—necessary in order to compare the claims of H1 and H2. In other words, the third party is still committed to an epistemology that H1 and H2 both reject on the grounds described earlier in this thesis. Furthermore, in the process of making the claim that there are no good reasons for judging between H1 and H2, the third party finds themselves having to defend their own position, which claims good reasons for making that judgment. But for the HUFPaTian, the third party is making the incoherent framework-relative claim to be able to see things from a non-framework-relative viewpoint.

At this point it becomes clear that there is a third way between what appears to be the horns of a dilemma when seen from an objectivist perspective. To say there is no super-framework is not the same as saying that one is as good as another: it is to make another framework-relative claim for the superiority of one’s own framework. In discussion of frameworks it is not incoherent for those who hold a position, to recognise, on the one hand, that all claims are framework relative but, on the other hand, to also claim that those who hold that position do in fact implicitly claim that theirs is the superior or most neutral or most objective one. Only a FOE, by arguing from the empirical diversity of frameworks and the provisionality of all claims, moves to the claim that no one framework is better than another.

Gadamer, for example, assumes that his is the best description of human understanding while at the same time recognising that all knowing, including his own claims, arises out of human finitude in all its dimensions. While the God’s-Eye View is impossible, any truth claim still implies a quasi God’s-Eye View—a seeing dimly but a seeing nevertheless. The claim that “there is no God’s-Eye View” is a universal truth claim and is sensible rather than incoherent as long as it is qualified as a provisional claim that there is no thoroughly objective, disengaged, or neutral position. Nevertheless, it remains a universal assertion made from a position that claims to have the most accurate perspective; Grondin’s words are apposite: “the claim to infinity
remains the daughter of finitude.'\textsuperscript{40} Of course modern science thinks it is a better view than Azande witchcraft; of course musicologist Edward Cone thinks his view of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is more informed than mine; of course the scientists involved in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change think that their view is superior to that of a non-scientist who denies anthropogenic global warming; of course the Pope thinks that the Christian faith is a superior description of ultimate realities than that of Richard Dawkins. But none of the claims of the scientific establishment or of Cone or of the IPCC or of the Pope need be based on a foundationalist epistemology. And none of them need to claim additionally that they are able to offer overwhelming reasons that would convince all who take the time to listen to them. All can be understood as universal, fiduciary, and provisional claims to robust truth arising from a conviction about the validity of a hermeneutic understanding of human understanding.

Good reasons from a HUFPaTian perspective are distinguishable from overwhelming or incontrovertible reasons because good reasons are always \textit{deemed} ‘good’ by those who hold them provisionally and who recognise that others may not be in agreement. Whether we speak of climate science, the aesthetics of music, historical meanings, or theological interpretation, disagreement between experts does not mean that none have good reasons for holding their views or that there is any sense in saying that disagreement amounts to an argument that one set of reasons is as good as another. If a HUFPaTian view is correct then there is no escaping that ‘good’ too will be a framework-embedded judgment that makes a provisional claim to robust truth. In this sense HUFPaT entails an element of epistemological voluntarism. Its provisionality means that ultimately, and because knowledge is neither certain nor coerced, the human agent is called to make a fiduciary act of commitment to what they believe is true. Common sense reveals that many people who swim in the same current of reasons come

to radically opposed conclusions, leading to the possibility of what Hazlett describes as “mutually recognized reasonable disagreement.”

Again, one’s belief is a choice for which one takes responsibility—not only in the sense that one ought to seek good reasons, but also in the recognition that one chooses how to see the reasons. Reasons never force belief upon us; often evidence does not lead to sure conviction, but rather can be seen in more than one way. There is overwhelming evidence for anthropogenic global warming and yet we may recognise that the climate sceptic’s arguments are not incomprehensible; they may not seem reasonable to me but I can see that they seem reasonable to another. In short, there may be good reasons for me to believe X but X remains a provisional commitment in the knowledge that others will not see my reasons as good, and, at the end of conversation, I may not be able to convince others of their superiority. Furthermore, at the end of conversation, I may see other’s reasons as better than my own; so long as I believe X, I see the reasons in its favour as good, but if I become convinced of not-X then I will have good reasons for my choice to commit myself to that view.

The conclusions arising from the sort of view I have described above are not novel. Guignon speaks of the “distinctive sort of realism” propounded by philosophical hermeneutics arising from the Heideggerian conception of being that is neither static nor simply given but rather is an “emerging-into-presence or coming-into-being” in time. So, he says, “ontological hermeneutics holds that we neither need nor can formulate rules or procedures applicable to every instance of interpretation. Nothing general can be said about interpretation aside from descriptions of what usually goes on. But our actual practices show that we have no real need for anything more than clear-sightedness about what we in fact do. Our ability to identify good interpretations and

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come up with them ourselves shows how deeply engrained interpreting is in us, the beings whose own being is interpretation.”

Grondin, too, resists algorithmic truth criteria and suggests the so-called problem of relativism is a red herring, amounting, as it does, to a problem of framing in which relativism only makes sense within a framework of absolutist or foundationalist expectations; what if it could be shown (although by its nature, no proof could be expected) that an absolutist framework is an idea that only exists as the negation of human finitude? In his evocative phrase, already quoted, he says, “the claim to infinity remains the daughter of finitude.” While this phrase is naturally read as emphasising finitude, it also has within it the claim to universal truth (nevertheless conditioned by that finitude which it recognises): as I have described earlier in this chapter, from within our finitude we nonetheless make ‘infinite’ or universal claims predicated provisionally. Grondin defines “absolute relativism” as “the doctrine that all opinions on a subject are equally good” and then argues that Gadamer is not an absolute relativist because “there are always reasons” for choosing one opinion over another. Paraphrasing Rorty, Grondin says, “the philosophers one terms relativists are simply those who estimate that these reasons are less algorithmic than many rationalists imagine.” So, concludes Grondin, the charge of relativism “is hardly more than a conceptual bugaboo constructed by those who possess a foundational conception of what truth or interpretation should be.”

The gist of Grondin’s defence is that the question of relativism looks entirely different depending on which side of the absolutist–’relativist’ divide one is sitting. From the absolutist position of traditional epistemology, the charge of relativism is to accuse the other of living in a world where there is either no truth or, at least, there is no knowledge of it. But from the other side, the likes of Gadamer and Polanyi see this charge as naive because it is dependent not just on impossible (but nevertheless Cartesian) ideals of human knowledge, but on a mistaken view altogether. In the eyes of

43. Ibid., 284.
44. Grondin, “Hermeneutics and Relativism,” 47.
45. Ibid., 46.
their detractors, their views saw off the branch on which they are sitting and which offers the possibility of objectivity. But from the perspective of HUFPaT there is no branch and never was or can be; all knowing is an intrinsically human production, but at the same time is connected to an objective reality. It is a medial event delimited, on the one hand, by human historicity and finitude and, on the other hand, by the world and ‘the things themselves’. Consequently, despite the human ‘production’ of knowledge, there are, nevertheless, better and worse reasons, some explicit, some tacit, for holding that what we believe is true. If this is a form of cognitive relativism, then so be it, but it is not arbitrary and no one who holds such a view would assent to the position that all opinions are equally good. At this point we imagine the absolutist might reveal their own incomprehension of the hermeneutic perspective by leaping to that higher logical level and saying, “prove to me that one reason is better than another.” But to ask for proof is, of course, to remain wedded to a model of human knowing that denies the reality of human finitude and the universality of interpretation, and denies that one can speak of knowing in the absence of reasons that strike one as overwhelming.

Wachterhauser sums up Gadamer’s position in a way that could equally apply to Polanyi and is thoroughly HUFPaTian: “Human knowing always depends on language and history, on a context of commitments and practices to show the thing in itself in a certain way … we never can see the whole truth but only a partial truth or a perspective but a truth about the thing itself nevertheless.”

On this view, “the truth is out there” and the essential distinction between truth and what is believed to be true is maintained. However, there are no epistemological methods, no algorithmic procedures, that offer guarantees of truth, and those like Gadamer and Polanyi who are comfortable acknowledging apparently incommensurable diversity of beliefs, as well as the contribution to them of historical and cultural factors, do not expose themselves to charges of anything more than what I have called R1 relativism. The main challenge for them is to describe as fully as possible what

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47. Citing the theme of the long-running and extraordinarily popular TV series The X-Files.
constitutes justification in their provisionalist epistemologies where proof is impossible and conclusions are always open to revision. In Polanyi’s words, already quoted, the task is “to achieve a frame of mind in which I may hold firmly to what I believe to be true, even though I know that it might conceivably be false.” 48 And, as we have seen, for Gadamer the crucial epistemological issue concerns the legitimacy of prejudgments: “What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others, which it is the undeniably task of critical reason to overcome?” 49

Having made a case for HUFPaT and shown it be immune from damaging charges of relativism, it is beyond the bounds of this thesis to offer further justification for the knowledge claims arising from HUFPaT. I agree with those who accept the views of Gadamer or Polanyi but have suggested that there is further work to be done in the task of outlining what justification looks like after the Heideggerian ontological turn. I have also alluded to the need to incorporate more critical aspects into this ‘reconceiving of epistemology’ such as Habermasian critiques, including an analysis of the power interests affecting knowledge production. But at the same time there can be a certain disingenuity about demands for explicit justification: firstly, those who propose to offer descriptions of human knowing are not logically bound to submit to the demands of those who ask why things work the way they do—in science we accept the descriptions of Newton and, later, Einstein concerning gravity but to this day physicists continue to search for the reasons why things fall down. Descriptions are not invalidated for a lack of explicit reasons why things are as they are. Second, to demand what amounts to a truth criterion is once again to demand a degree of specificity that HUFPaT denies is possible. In the face of a lack of objective, specific, methodical rules to arbitrate, Polanyi resorts to speaking of the “mental satisfaction” sought in the face of knowing that, for example, “objective experience cannot compel a decision either between the magical and the naturalist interpretation of daily life or between the scientific and the theological interpretation of nature.” Ultimately, he says, the final decision about what to believe is decided by weighing up “alternative forms of mental

48. Polanyi, Personal Knowledge, 214; ibid.
49. Ibid., 214; ibid.
satisfaction.” And, in his discussion of Dilthey, Gadamer speaks approvingly of an “immediate living certainty that all ends and values have when they appear in human consciousness with an absolute claim.”

In the case of Polanyi, Echeverria offers the beginnings of a solution to overcoming the problem of the gap between belief and truth by suggesting a possible transcendental argument. He recognises, like Grondin, that the only way forward is not to resist relativism on the terms set up by the non-relativist accuser and he rightly says that “we must resist defending epistemological realism apart from and independently of a metaphysical account of reality and our place in it as knowing beings; metaphysics and epistemology are mutually interwoven from the start.” And so, he continues, the question to be asked is: “what must reality, including I, as a knower, be like in order that human knowledge be intelligible at all?” He cites Thomas Nagel’s naturalist suggestion of an “unheard-of-property of the natural order” that relates humans to the world, although Echeverria goes further in offering a theological solution—a path that I too would follow, believing that an ultimately theological account offers the resources for affirming both radical human finitude and our extraordinary ability to grasp the natural and human world. Either way, the point is that the relationship of knower to the world is of such a nature that provisional knowledge is possible although the details of that relationship are stubbornly resistant to exact philosophical, scientific, and theological analyses. However, such speculative claims are clearly not going to satisfy the demands of the critics of hermeneutic approaches to truth.

Schmidt’s attempt at identifying a truth criterion in Gadamer, which he identifies as “the enlightening quality of the perspective of the thing itself,” would prove similarly unsatisfactory to those who seek clear and distinct criteria for justifying truth claims and who, in the absence of such criteria, would charge the claimants with

some form of relativism. Schmidt says that “nowhere in Truth and Method does Gadamer define a truth-criterion” but nevertheless disagrees with Grondin who argues that there is no hermeneutic truth criterion. The enlightening of which Schmidt speaks is self-authenticating: he says, in a way that overstates the case by underplaying the agency involved in understanding, that for Gadamer “one arrives too late to ask what one should believe. The experience of the enlightening perspective requires no further justification; it is enlightening. To ask what one should believe is to presume that what was experienced was not enlightening.”

Such are some ways to deal with the challenges that Polanyi and Gadamer set themselves but which, in the nature of their expositions, they never answer as explicitly as their readers would like. However, it is beyond the bounds of this thesis to investigate further the possibilities of truth criteria; it suffices to say that HUFPaT is a plausible description of the nature of human knowing and, additionally, that while RI cognitive relativism is a valid description capturing the provisionality of claims, there is no necessary R2 entailment that asserts either that all reasons are equal or that our believing X makes it so; relativist charges that can be sustained simply amount to a recognition of human finitude.

6.5 “We understand as we do because we exist as we do”

The discussion above is largely of the epistemological implications of HUFPaT; it concerns the practical outworkings of my account of human knowing. However HUFPaT arises from ontological ‘foundations’ that serve as validation for the radical reconception of epistemology involved. Epistemology isn’t reconceived simply because humans are more fallible than Descartes dreamed, therefore consigning human knowing to permanent epistemic insecurity; epistemology has been radically reconceived, or according to Rorty, for example, decommissioned altogether, because such a decommissioning is entailed by an ontological account that makes more sense than that

55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 79.
of the subject–object dualism at the core of traditional epistemology. Not only are we epistemically forever-bound to provisionality by the hermeneutic circle in which every act of knowing invokes both tacit and conscious presuppositions; not only are all knowledge claims rightly called personal judgments, made with greater or lesser degrees of expertise and conviction; not only is all observation ‘theory laden’; not only are we faced with these conditions that speak of a fallible human subject who, we might imagine, with time, could overcome such contingent limitations, arriving little by little at a coherent and explicit web of beliefs; not only for these reasons is all knowing provisional. All knowing is in principle provisional because knowing is ontologically not what we imagined it was; because knowing is not a relationship between discrete subjects and objects.

The hermeneutic basis of HUFPaT, found in Heideggerian and Gadamerian accounts, means that there are no longer even ideal disengaged observers who nevertheless find themselves contingently consigned to provisionality. To imagine that disengaged subject is still to imagine a subject in a world (and therefore, in fact, not disengaged from it). This would not take seriously Heidegger’s warning that “even if one should invoke the doctrine that the subject must presuppose and indeed always does unconsciously presuppose the presence-at-hand of the ‘external world’, one would still be starting with the construct of an isolated subject.”\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 249.} But Heidegger’s Dasein is irreducibly situated in principle—always and already part and parcel of the world that is co-constituted with it. “Dasein always comes ‘too late’,\footnote{Ibid.}” says Heidegger, for any attempt at separating Dasein and its world: the unitary phenomenon of Being-in-the-world is the human way of being and any theorising about knowing must accept this as given.

Even if we reject a Cartesian foundationalism and turn to a coherentist view of a web of ungrounded beliefs, consigned to a “frictionless spinning in a void,”\footnote{John McDowell, \textit{Mind and World} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 11.} such an account is predicated on the human knower looking from outside the floating web of

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beliefs, from a meta-world, from a God’s-Eye View, and weighing up whether this web or that (Western science or the Azande for example) is the ‘truer’ system of beliefs. But the ontological dimensions of HUFPaT overturn such conceptions. There is no web of beliefs from which I can stand back: not only am I always and already found within this world or that, but those beliefs and this ‘world’ are forever ‘mine’ with the mutual constitution this implies; this is the profound unity at the heart of the Heideggerian vision that overturns such conceptual possibilities.

In the first chapter I noted that while this thesis delves into philosophical hermeneutics and epistemology, the motivation for doing so is apologetic: it is an exploration of the theoretical landscape of the ‘postmodern’ context that leaves Christians able to defend the robust claim that, despite the possibility that they “could conceivably be wrong,”61 Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life for all. In the end HUFPaT is a step in the direction of saying “we walk by faith and not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7) in all aspects of everyday and intellectual life. So, what does one say to the Christian believer or, for that matter, the budding scientist or historian or social scientist who, perhaps, have read their Heidegger, or who intuit the radical finitude at the heart of human being? My answer, in summary, is the following.

The insight of so-called postmodernism is that traditional epistemology, while it offered the promise of certainty, was a promissory note drawn on an empty account. On the other hand, a radically revised ‘epistemology’, resulting in robust but provisional claims to universal truth, is possible. This new understanding of knowing affirms many of our everyday epistemic convictions, which for practical purposes serve us well for making our way about in ‘the world’. But this new epistemology arises from a view of human knowing that I have called HUFPaT, rather than on the basis of a naive realist approach (even if known as ‘critical realism’), which merely makes a concession to the contingent fallibility of human thinking.

I affirm that elephants and rooms, the moon and anthropogenic global warming are all aspects of reality independent of what anyone might think about the matter. But

our thinking about, and access to, ‘elephants’ in ‘rooms’ or ‘the moon’ or ‘AGW’ are not only epistemically relative but are ontologically part of our ‘world’, co-constituted with who we are as interpreting, meaning-making human beings. Our ‘world’ is not merely a collection of objects—so-called ‘raw data’ of experience—but is the meaning-filled correlate of the meaning-making ‘subject’. ‘The moon’ is forever changed by the Apollo 8 ‘Earthrise’ photos and the Apollo 11 landing: ‘the moon’ is no longer what it was. Furthermore, there is no other access to the moon but through ‘the moon’ that is part of my world: my world is a world partially constituted by Apollo 11 and the moon. To remove from my world, piece by piece, Apollo 11, lunar eclipses, elephants, rooms, and AGW would not merely leave me in the same world with less experience; it would leave me in a different world and one in which the ‘I’ would no longer be the me of that first world.

When our oldest son died of cancer, our world changed; now we are different people, having been reconstituted over and over along with our world. Life after Ben’s death is not the old life with an extra experience, tacked on, so to speak, to the old. Life after Ben is new life, different life; it is life in a different world remade by history, of which I am both product and architect. However, bereavement is only a case writ large of the everyday and largely unnoticed but nevertheless world-changing events: every day in multifarious ways Dasein and its world are mutually reconstituted.

While the description of HUFPaT in this thesis has been far from theologically explicit it is consonant with Christian understandings of seeing “in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor 13:12); of humility; of interdependent solidarity built on a network of trust and mutual responsibility, rather than isolated individualism; of the Christian dependence on revelation and tradition rather than the hubris of the isolated knowing ego; and, finally, of the call to live by faith in all its theological and extra-theological senses.

The view of knowing and understanding presented in this thesis, based on the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, reconfigures the landscape of epistemology. Not only are traditional epistemic pretensions diluted by the ubiquity of human finitude but the taken-for-granted ontology of subject and object, upon which traditional epistemology depends, has been shown to be an inadequate understanding of
human being and of human involvement with the so-called external world. There simply is no Archimedean point or God’s-Eye View; the ‘external’ world, our theories and knowledge claims about it, and our own selves are seamlessly bound up in a way that forever undoes the aspirations of traditional epistemology.

Despite the long arduous Cartesian attempt to guarantee truth in both the natural and human sciences, and despite reactions to that quest, which would do away with the possibility of robust truth altogether, there is a middle way that accurately describes human knowing and is founded on philosophical hermeneutics. And we have seen that despite those who would hold natural science apart as a high road to truth, this middle hermeneutic way applies as much to scientific knowing as it does in other disciplines, because, notwithstanding the distinctiveness of science, it too is a human practice and, it too, conditioned by the reality of finite human experience is always and already engaged in a cultural and historical setting that legitimates hermeneutics.

In whatever discipline we consider, truth always arises event-like as part of an ongoing engagement that makes a medial space for reality to reveal itself. And in order to arrive at knowing or understanding I must entrust myself to the authority of the prejudices that come with my own standpoint, conditioned by tradition, culture, and other interlocutors, and I must prove myself trustworthy as I critically examine those prejudices and sincerely commit myself to play my part in the dynamic that has truth as its goal. This is why all human knowing or understanding can validly be described as a hermeneutic approach to truth, and as such is characterised by universality in its various dimensions, and by its inescapably fiduciary and provisional nature. To combine Polanyian and Gadamerian phraseology: all knowing is personal hermeneutic understanding.
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